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“TOO GOOD FOR HIM.”

LONDON. PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, STAMFORD STREET
AND CHARING CROSS.

“ TOO GOOD FOR HIM.”

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

(MRS. ROSS CHURCH.)

AUTHOR OF “ LOVE’S CONFLICT.”

“ A perfect woman, nobly plann’d,
To warn, to suffer, and command,
And yet a spirit still and bright,
With something of an Angel light.”

WORDSWORTH.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON :

RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

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“TOO GOOD FOR HIM.”

CHAPTER I.

A NEW SISTER.

BUT a few days after, as Rex was driving her over to Wimbledon, to be introduced to Lady Charlotte Huntley, she broached the subject to him, which was uppermost in her mind.

“Reginald, I want to have a little talk with you about money matters. I am afraid the Peyton's will feel my leaving them very much at first. I have been used to pay for so many little things for them, the children's schooling amongst others. I should like (if you entirely approve of it) to continue paying for the eldest one, Robert, for a year or two longer. It is only sixty pounds a year. By that time he will be out in the world, I hope; he is nearly sixteen now.”

Rex didn't answer at once. The fact is, even sixty pounds a year out of fifteen hundred would be felt in his embarrassed circumstances. Fifteen hundred itself seemed little enough in comparison to what he had lost. And yet the money was hers, and he did not like to make a remonstrance, it seemed so grasping; so he applied the whip rather more smartly than was necessary to the sides of the animal he was driving, and was silent. Isobel saw at once that the proposal had not pleased him.

“I only mean it as a suggestion, Reginald,” she added, more timidly. “My sister's family have no right to expect any help from me when I am once married.”

“Your money is your own, Isobel, to do as you like with. It was settled entirely upon yourself, without any reserve. Your brother-in-law told me so in the course of our conversation yesterday.”

“But I don't want to do as *I* like with it only, Reginald. It must be as you like also, or it will not be done at all. There can be no ‘meum et tuum’ with you and I. What is mine is yours, or will be. I only thought that the Peyton's would miss my help so much more if it

was all withdrawn from them at once. I would not bind myself down to anything. I only wished to pay for Bob's schooling until he leaves school. Then they must shift for themselves."

"Of course, pay for it then, Isobel; it would doubtless only be fair, after all. *I* am not the one to complain, who am about to take you altogether to myself."

But though he spoke cheerfully, and so far deceived her, his cheerfulness was only on the surface, and she missed something, she hardly knew what, from his conversation. Not that it was entirely on account of her wishing to pay Master Bob Peyton's school-bills for the next few years; there was a weightier matter troubling Rex Reverdon's heart just then; the unsatisfied feeling which all experience in the accomplishment of an act which they cannot justify to their own consciences, and yet which they have not the courage to avoid doing. At such times we call the course of our actions Fate; we were truer to our hearts—truer to what we know to be true if we called ourselves—cowards.

The first excitement of the acceptance of his proposal to Miss Fane being over, Rex Reverdon

felt almost frightened at what he had done. He dreaded what he was about to bring upon himself,—the prospect of a life spent with a woman he was indifferent to; and although he had acknowledged that even if he continued free, Pearl Ashton could never be more to him than she was, he regarded with horror the total barrier he was about to raise between himself and the possibility of ever making her his. And as he suffered himself to brood over the destiny which it had been his whole aim for the last few weeks to secure, the evils of it seemed to enlarge and magnify, until they assumed the proportions of veritable “Giants Despair” in his eyes. And yet he knew (to use his own phraseology) that he had “been and gone and done it,” and that there was no retreating now. It was bitterly unreasonable of him to visit this mood upon poor Isobel; but which of us is reasonable at all times? Gathering back his thoughts from resting upon some such ideas as the foregoing, the words he uttered were not always so warm as should have issued from a lover’s lips. But Isobel had not perceived it so much as you would have imagined. True, she sometimes thought him a little “distract;” but when

aroused his words were always outwardly kind and polite, if not ardent, and she was not of an exacting temperament. She was one of those people so few and far between who know how to love for love's sake ; who take the passion in its true sense—abnegation of self. It was to her so great an honour and glory that Rex Reverdon should love her at all, that she did not stop to test the amount of his affection by weight and balance, and see if it equalled her own. To be allowed to love him as a right was all-sufficient happiness for her ; she thought too much of him, too little of herself, to have time to fret over the absence of little lover-like attentions. What he gave her she took thankfully, and magnified their importance in large measure, giving him back threefold into his bosom ; and as she commenced her partnership in life with him, so she carried it out to the end ; but I must not anticipate my story. You see she was a very unambitious woman, and very neglectful of the rights of her sex—particularly in courtship days ; the rights of teasing and worrying a man out of his life, and expecting him to adore and be grateful for it in return. But she was a very woman through it all.

Lady Charlotte Huntley had of course been duly informed of her son's engagement to the heiress, and had been graciously pleased to approve of it. In fact, marrying a heiress was about the best thing poor Rex could have done at this period to retrieve his shattered character in his mother's eyes; indeed, I may say the only thing. As to whether he loved her or didn't love her, that was a matter of quite secondary importance. It was no concern whatever of Lady Charlotte's; she never thought even of making an inquiry upon the subject. The day for the marriage had already been fixed, and it was to take place at the same time in the ensuing month, the middle of July. Indeed, there was no reason for delay, and several, on Rex's part, for haste. They were to spend the first three months on the Continent; after that to settle near London—at Wimbledon itself most likely. All this had been arranged the day before, and Lady Charlotte had been made cognisant of the new-made plans, and put her sign and seal thereto. And she had been quite eager that Rex should bring his affianced bride as soon as possible on the very next day down to lunch at “The Oaks.” Mr.

Huntley was going to stay at home expressly to be introduced to his new daughter-in-law. In fact, considering the *mauvaise odeur* poor Rex had been in but a fortnight before, the advent of Miss Fane made quite a little commotion down at Wimbledon, and on their arrival, on the present occasion, at "The Oaks," she was decidedly the star ascendant for the day; Rex was not indifferent to the homage paid her. He may not have felt it so much as he would have done had the woman he presented to his family as his future wife been the woman of his heart: but, nevertheless, he liked it for her sake as well as his own. Isobel was looking her best that day; she was becomingly dressed, and her recently-acquired happiness, mixed with a little proud shyness at being received as a Reverdon to be, mantled her cheek with such a charming flush, that Lady Charlotte's look of pleased surprise was so evident as she advanced to receive her, that Rex felt as if the reception was accorded to himself, and his spirits rose ten per cent. immediately. And, indeed, some of his mother's cordiality to her future daughter-in-law did reflect itself upon him, so that seeing them together, you would scarcely have believed that

the interview I described in a former chapter had really transpired between them. Mr. Huntley was also there in honour of the expected guests. He was a fine, well-made man; and handsome still, although he was over fifty years of age; but his face was of that order of beauty which never goes with brains. He had a good complexion though, still, and dark, bright eyes, and a good stock on hand of senseless nothings for women's ears, so that the ladies all pronounced him “charming,” and what more could a man desire? When Isobel was at last released from their congratulations, compliments, and good wishes, and had been carried off by Lady Charlotte to lay aside her bonnet and mantle before luncheon, and returned looking so much at home in her soft muslin dress and classically-braided hair, Rex took her hand, and led her into the dining-room, where Gabriel was already seated in his invalid chair.

“Isobel,” he said, as they came up to the boy, “you have seen my brother Gabriel before, but he did not know then that you were to be his sister, did you, Gabriel?”

Gabriel Huntley had heard, of course, in general with the rest of the family, that his

brother Rex was going to be married to the lady whom he had seen riding with him in the Park. How the news had affected him he could hardly say himself. For Rex, whom he had almost considered as his own property, to be married, and belong to somebody else, was a bitter pill for Gabriel to swallow, though he was too unselfish, too like Isobel herself in his nature, to say so; but then again, the marriage would increase Rex's happiness, and Gabriel would have died to make Rex happy. This interview with his future sister had been regarded by him with a degree of nervous dread, which had made him remonstrate against having his chair wheeled into the drawing-room to witness her first arrival, but when he raised his dark eyes at his brother's affectionate address and saw Isobel's face, beaming with womanly compassion and tenderness for his afflicted state, the little undefined jealousy of her gave way, and as she stooped to kiss him, he put his other hand (one was already fast locked in that of Rex) into hers at once.

"Will you think of me as a sister, Gabriel?" she said.

"Oh, Rex!" exclaimed the boy to his brother,

while he answered her, “I *will* love her, for your sake! It will make you happier, won’t it, Rex?”

He was alluding to the marriage, and his brother understood him. The appeal, so earnestly put, as if it *would* be answered, and truthfully, startled Rex. It startled Isobel also. She raised herself again from her stooping posture, and stood looking at her betrothed husband, as she waited for his reply. Her eyes, bent so earnestly upon him, seemed to cry out even through their dumb eloquence, “Will it make you happier? Tell the truth; we two, who love you best, wait to hear it.”

But Rex did not tell the truth. His hearers waited in vain. He only answered, very gravely:

“It would make me very *unhappy*, Gabriel, if you didn’t love her; but I have no fear of that myself.”

She ought to have been satisfied, but I do not think she was. As her eyes left his face without a glance from his meeting them, she sighed; a very slight sigh, very low, and very quickly checked; but Gabriel heard it.

“I must go and hand my mother in to

luncheon," said Rex presently, and he left the room.

"Miss Fane," said the boy, eagerly, as soon as they were alone, "you love him dearly, don't you?"

"Very dearly," she answered.

"Who could help it?" he went on to say, "so good and generous and kind as he is. Miss Fane, he's the dearest brother in the world. I love no one so much. Oh, love him and take care of him, for my sake!"

She was touched with the boy's earnestness, and knelt down by his chair, to bring her face close to his, as she said :

"Always and for ever, Gabriel, as long as I have life to love him ; and you will love me too, will you not, for his sake?"

"Yes," he said. "I do already. I have been very wicked, Isobel—may I call you 'Isobel?'"

She nodded her head.

"I have felt so miserably jealous ; but it is all gone now I have seen you and spoken to you. I know you love him by your eyes. You will never turn against him as some others do."

It was a strange speech to come from so

young a boy, and she felt it to be so ; but it confirmed a suspicion she had held in her mind before, that Reginald was not a great favourite at home. And as the idea crossed it, she vowed afresh, that she would only love him all the more for it. The drawing-room party now entered the luncheon-room, and she rose hastily from her kneeling position, as she told Lady Charlotte that she had been making the acquaintance of her son Gabriel. Lady Charlotte was not displeased to find her there. She would have had all the world, if she could, kneeling and worshipping by the side of Gabriel's invalid-chair. She considered him worthy of all worship and honour. As they placed themselves at the luncheon-table, Miss Fane was of course allotted the guest's place, at the right hand of her host. He tried to make himself as agreeable as he could to his visitor, and deluged her with small talk during the whole of the meal. But Mr. Huntley's small talk was of the very smallest, the mildest tipple possible, and chiefly turned upon the sayings and doings of people she had never even heard of before, therefore it cannot be supposed that she felt very much interested in it. But presently he mentioned a

name that was well known to his step-son, who pricked up his ears from the other end of the table.

"Clare, did you say, Sir. What of him?"

"He's going to do pretty much the same as you're going to do, Reverdon — hang himself, and without half so good an excuse either," he added, with a little bow to Isobel.

"Going to be married, is he?" exclaimed Rex, recognising the stereotyped joke; "why I have heard nothing of it. Who to?"

"I only heard it yesterday," rejoined Mr. Huntley. "Clarkson, of the War Office, told me. Who to? well, who should you *think*?"

"I can't imagine at all," answered Rex, with a puzzled expression on his face. "He was never a man for society, you know, or anything of that sort. I don't know any of his clique. Clare's the last man in the world I should have thought of as going to be married."

"So I should have said of Mr. Reginald Reverdon a month ago," observed Mr. Huntley, which made Isobel blush. But Rex only laughed.

"Ah, I've got a good excuse, Sir, as you said yourself just now."

“ Well, I suppose Clare thinks the same,” answered Mr. Huntley, “ though I don’t know if every one would agree with him so readily. Clarkson tells us she’s a Mrs. Daly, a widow, with lots of money; so I suppose it’s all right.”

Before the words “ lots of money” had scarcely resolved themselves into thin air from Mr. Huntley’s mouth, an ominous dry cough from Lady Charlotte’s had warned him of the imprudence he had been guilty of. He was a stupid man, as I have said before—an empty rattle, who was constantly putting his foot in it, from talking with too much speed and too little thought; but he was not so obtuse as to be blind in the present instance to the mistake he had made. Isobel did not seem to have observed the allusion, or if so, to have connected it in any way with herself; but Rex Reverdon looked guiltily conscious, as he fixed his eyes upon his plate and commenced playing, in an insanely, unnecessary manner, with his knife and fork. Finding he had made a mistake, Mr. Huntley quickly strove to remedy it, by dashing into another phase of the subject, only desirous that his hearers should at once have it wiped off the

tablets of their memory, that he thought “money” a desirable appendage to a wife.

“I dare say she’s a very nice creature, and all that sort of thing,” he said, whilst he fidgeted with the wine to cover his confusion (for Mr. Huntley was a man who easily blushed); “but the worst of it is, that she is half a dozen years older than he is, at least Clarkson swears so; but I don’t quite believe him, as I said at the time. Clare is an orphan, I know, but I can’t think he misses his mother quite so much as to want to replace her at his time of life. Why, what can the boy be thinking of? He isn’t as old as you are, is he Rex?”

“I don’t know his exact age,” said Rex, looking across the table, out at the window, up at the picture-frames, anywhere but towards his step-father’s face and Isobel’s chair.

It was her turn to feel the allusion now, and she grew scarlet under it. She did not commence to play with her food as Rex had done, nor to fidget at all. She sat quite still, and she kept her eyes fixed on her host’s features; but the bitterest pain shot through her heart as she listened to his words. Pain, not so much for herself as for Rex; pain that he should be sub-

jected to hear such cutting allusions for her sake ; that she should be the cause for which he was subject to them. She thought he must feel it so much for her ; she did not dare to look his way either ; she almost expected to hear his voice say —“ Isobel, don’t mind it, for I do not.” But, of course, no such thing happened. No dry cough from Lady Charlotte warned Mr. Huntley this time that he had again overstepped the bounds of prudence ; on the contrary, she made her own remarks on the subject in question ; made free to believe that Mr. Clarkson was wrong, and that Mr. Clare would never think of doing anything so foolish.

“ Why, she would be quite an old woman by the time Clare was still a young man.” She concluded by saying, “ Women are always ten years in advance of men, my dear, even if they start together.”

And as she sat and listened, a feeling of wounded pride rose up in Isobel’s breast that they could so speak before her, and not know that they were touching upon a delicate subject. But in this she did both Lady Charlotte and Mr. Huntley wrong. Not that the former was incapable of wounding where she disliked ; no

one, indeed, could outdo her there ; but here, at the present moment, and to the present company, she had no intention of being otherwise than rendering herself agreeable. The fact is, Rex had not communicated the knowledge of his intended wife's age to "The Oaks" party, not considering it necessary for them to know it, and they had no idea she was older than he was. They may have guessed her to be about the same age. She certainly did not look older than he did. He had led a dissipated life, and late hours, and other habits still more detrimental to the health, had left their mark upon his five-and-twenty years, and added several to them, in his appearance. She, on the contrary, had spent her thirty summers peacefully, if not happily. No great storms of passion had crossed her spirit ; even her grief for the death of Harold Gray had been more subdued and quietly despairing than violent ; and, therefore, time had passed over her lightly, not liking to mar the fair picture of peace, arising from a well-spent life, which her countenance presented with the cruel marks of his hard-hearted scythe. Yet, had it been otherwise, since Isobel Fane was sufficiently honest to tell her real age, without

reserve, to the world, I doubt if she would not still have borne the reputation of looking younger than she was. And yet only the reputation ; for as I said before, being thirty she looked thirty. But with regard to women's ages, the whole scale seems to me to have shifted so completely out of place during the last few years, that it is no longer possible to take a private census of our friends, or to guess them to be what they are. There are women so utterly foolish, in fact, the majority of them lie under this imputation, that they cannot be induced to give up their real ages ; forty calls herself five-and-thirty ; thirty calls herself five-and-twenty ; so that when real, genuine five-and-twenty tells the truth, we, comparing her fresh charms with those of thirty, whom we have been told is the same age, cry out, “How young you look. I should have taken you for twenty.”

And so on through every stage of their existence, until men grow confused and puzzled, and imagine women of thirty must look as faded and *passée* as their lady friends of forty (or there-about) do. If women only knew (but when was it any use telling women the truth ?)—but if they would only believe that being thirty, and having

worn well, it is far better to confess their real age and bear their honestly-won laurels, than alleging they are only five-and-twenty, to run the risk of being thought to look "more than that," this wretched, universal deception would probably cease, and with it many other deceptions, as wretched and more demoralizing. But as long as men admire women for their youth and beauty only, and let them see it, women will continue to attempt to deceive them, not only with their mouths, but with their faces and figures, into believing that they are still young and still beautiful.

But Isobel Fane was one of the few who have never been guilty of such deception, or tried to be so. All, with her, was fair and above-board. She was one of the sincerest women possible. The remarks of Lady Charlotte and Mr. Huntley pained her, because they suggested to her, for the first time, that perhaps she was wronging Rex in her contemplated marriage with him. It had never struck her he might be subjected to humiliating remarks on her account. How would he bear them? What effect would they have upon his affection for her? The thought disturbed her greatly,

and the light spirits which she had displayed during the first part of the meal disappeared under its influence. But the conversation was general again, and no one seemed to observe her change of manner; so she thought, at least, though she was mistaken.

When the luncheon was ended, they all adjourned into the garden, where the little girls were introduced to Miss Fane with great pride by their mother. They were all fine, rosy children, taking after their father, and made great friends with their new sister-in-law, hanging about her and crumpling her muslin dress, as they became almost as familiar with her as they were with their brother Rex. After they had been a short time in the garden, Mr. Huntley walked towards his farmyard on a tour of inspection, and Lady Charlotte left the young people alone, and returned into the house. The mid-day sun was too powerful for her to remain in it long. Then Rex commenced a game with his little sisters, and Gabriel and Isobel were left alone, his chair was wheeled upon the grass lawn, and she sat down upon the footboard of it, as she watched the romping of the children. Up and down the green slopes and round the

beds of flowering shrubs they chased their big brother, he running before them, in shirt and trousers, having thrown his coat and waistcoat down upon the grass, until they fairly beset him on every side, and feigning to be conquered against his will, he tumbled any way upon his back, and was instantly covered with half a dozen girls, all on the top of him at once. He looked so boyish, care for the time banished from his mind, his bright, disordered hair falling about his flushed and heated face, that the remembrance of the conversation at the luncheon-table re-struck her painfully, and she sighed.

“What has worried you, Isobel?” said Gabriel.

“Worried me, Gabriel?” she asked, trying to speak lightly. “Why, what *should* worry me? Why do you ask?”

“You sighed just now,” he said.

“Did I sigh?”

“Yes; and there was something worried you at luncheon, I am sure; for I was watching your face, and I could see the change come over it.”

“I shall be afraid of you, Gabriel,” she said,

attempting a laugh ; “ you are a little wizard. You mustn’t fancy every time my face changes that I am worried ; it often changes. I have a great many things to think of.”

“ Not sad things ?” he asked.

“ Some pleasant and some sad,” she answered.

“ I should have thought you could have none but pleasant things to think about, Isobel, when you are just going to marry Rex. Now look at the difference between you and me : I suppose I shall be chained to this wretched chair all my life. I do not dare to think of the possibility sometimes !”

“ Dear Gabriel !” said Isobel, pitifully, “ I feel so sorry for you ! But you are very likely to get well, are you not ?”

“ So *mamma* says,” answered the boy, in a tone of slight contempt ; “ but her wish is father to her thought, you see ; and I believe the doctor tells her so just to please her ; but I know better myself : I shall never get well again, and the only question is how long I shall have to lie here—perhaps for years.”

“ It’s a great affliction,” she said, softly ; she scarcely knew what else to say.

"I should think it was," he replied; "and Rex's love is the only thing that has made it bearable to me. If it hadn't been for Rex I should have wished myself dead scores of times."

"But your mother?" urged Isobel.

"What good am I to her!" exclaimed Gabriel, "lying here like a useless log? I had better be dead at once, and then all her suspense will be over. The longer I live the more she hopes."

"But, Gabriel," said Isobel, and the tears had risen in her eyes at his words, "there must be a purpose in your living, or you would not be permitted to do so: we all live for some good, to ourselves or others."

"I wish you would show me what good I can be," he said, gloomily.

"Do you?" she answered. "Gabriel, will you let me show you? I should so like to talk with you about it. When——" And there she stopped; for she had made a resolution in her heart during the last hour which might make "when" "never." But Gabriel took up her sentence, and finished it for her.

“When you are my sister,” he said, “and live here, (Rex says very likely he shall bring you to Wimbledon,) I hope we shall often talk together about many things. I am sure I shall love you, Isobel; I don’t know what it is about you, or why, but I felt, from the moment I saw you in the Park, that I should like you. Is it because you love Rex so much, or because you speak so kindly to me, that I feel as if I knew you already? I am sure I couldn’t have called another woman ‘Isobel’ so soon, for they say, in general, I am very shy; but I don’t feel a bit shy to-day.”

She was pleased to hear the boy say so; if it had not been for that resolution growing up in her mind, she would have turned and told him how glad she was to have the prospect of being his sister, and the right to talk to him and attend on him more than other people. But, as she tried to say it, something flashed across her mind, and tied her tongue. But she did tell him that she was very glad he was not shy with her; and she hoped that they should be always friends. But when Rex came up to know when she would like to return to town, Gabriel was disappointed that she

wished to go as soon as possible, and would not hear of staying for a late dinner, or even coffee.

“My sister expected me home early,” she said, in apology to Lady Charlotte, when they returned to the house; “and I should not like to disappoint her.” And Lady Charlotte said of course she hoped Miss Fane would please herself; but she trusted that was not the last time, by many, that they should see her down at “The Oaks,” before a certain happy event took place. Which allusion made poor Miss Fane colour up—but not with pleasure—as her eyes unconsciously sought the direction in which Rex Reverdon was standing. But when her adieux had been properly administered to Lady Charlotte, and Mr. Huntley, returned from his farmyard, was waiting to hand her into the carriage, she ran back once more to say a last word to Gabriel.

“Good-bye, dear Gabriel. You won’t forget me, will you? You will try to love me, whether I am ever your sister or not?”

“Don’t you think I shall live to see it, Isobel? Yes, I shall; I’m not so far gone as that.”

“Hush! I didn’t mean that,” she answered. “I only thought, ‘there’s many a slip—’ you know.”

“Not here,” he rejoined, eagerly. “Isobel, if I was the woman that Rex loved I *wouldn’t* let him slip.”

She tried to laugh it off.

“Good-bye,” she repeated. “We mustn’t talk any more nonsense. Good-bye.”

And yet at that moment she had voluntarily resolved to give her lover up.

CHAPTER II.

AN OFFERED SACRIFICE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

WHEN they were once more driving together on their way home, a spell of silence seemed to fall upon Rex Reverdon and Isobel Fane. He was a little put out at her having left Wimbledon so early, although a word from him would have kept her there, and that word had not been spoken; but he fancied that his mother had not been pleased at their quick return, and at present he wished to remain in his mother's good graces. Isobel, on her part, as soon as she found herself *tête-à-tête* with her lover, had evinced a feverish restlessness, as if she wished to say something, and yet was half afraid, which made itself evident in her absent manner when he spoke to her, and the sudden way in which she would commence a subject to him and then break off.

“Rex, do you know——”

“Well, what?” perhaps he would answer.

“I mean—Gabriel and I got on very well together, didn’t we?”

“I was sure you would like Gabriel. I always call him a child; but he is scarcely more of a child than myself. He has laid in that chair thinking and observing all his life, till he knows about twice as much as most men. What do you think of my mother, Isobel?”

“She was very kind and polite,” said Isobel.

“Did you tell her all about me, Rex?”

“How do you mean ‘all?’”

“Everything that concerns me—everything that you know yourself.”

“I told her everything that concerns *her*, Isobel; not more. What makes you ask?”

“Oh, nothing—that is, nothing in particular.”

“Are you tired?”

“No, not at all; thank you.”

It was after this brief intercourse that the spell of silence fell on them both that I have mentioned. They left Wimbledon far behind them, and Putney and Clapham, and still they were both silent. Then Isobel woke up, and knew that half their drive was over, and that

if she wished to speak to him she must do it soon ; so she said, timidly,
“ Rex.”

But he didn’t seem to hear.

“ Rex, dear.”

“ Eh ! what ? Did you speak to me, Isobel ?” he then said, waking up in his turn.

“ What are you thinking of, Rex ?”

He could not tell her : he had been thinking of just the same thing as herself—the conversation at luncheon ; but not with the same feeling regarding it ; not with any idea of giving up his projected marriage ; but only considering what people would say of him, and whether that he wanted a mother as well as Clare. It was not a cheerful thought, for Rex was not proof against banter of any sort, and the prospect of it had made him feel depressed.

So he answered, evasively—

“ I was thinking of several things, Isobel ; you have been so silent, I had nothing to do but to think.”

“ I wonder if you have been thinking of the same thing as I have,” she went on to say, hurriedly ; “ of what Mr. Huntley said of that Mr. Clare at luncheon.”

Rex was startled to find that her thoughts had really corresponded with his own, but he was too good a politician to let her see it.

“You don’t mean to tell me,” he said, affecting a gaiety he did not feel, “that you can think twice of such nonsense, Isobel? My father-in-law is always saying something he does not mean. He would have cut out his tongue sooner than have mentioned it, if he had imagined for a moment that you would have even noticed his remark. It is not worth a thought.”

“But I cannot think so, Reginald,” she answered. “I have thought of it ever since; the difference in our ages never struck me in that light before; of course I have known all along that my being the oldest is a disadvantage for you; but somehow, you seem so infinitely above me in all things, and I feel so young, that it did not appear so great as perhaps it ought to have done. But when Mr. Huntley spoke of Mr. Clare in that manner, as if he was so very foolish to marry a wife six years older than himself, and your mother, too, agreed in his opinion, the injustice I have done you, in accepting your generous proposal, seemed to strike me for the first time. Reginald, it must not be; you

must think again before you throw yourself away upon me ; suppose people said the same of you as they do of Mr. Clare, I don't think you could bear it, and I am sure it would make me unhappy. I love you too dearly to demand such a sacrifice on your part ; whatever it cost me to give you up, I would rather do it than that you should repent of our marriage afterwards. Reginald, I am much too old for you ; I can see it plainly now, and you have been in too great a hurry, you have not looked about you enough yet. Let us put off this marriage until you have sounded your own heart better."

She spoke with a great deal of emotion, but with a quiet dignity that stood champion for her own deserts, and a vast tenderness that seemed to claim protection for his future happiness against himself. There is no doubt that Mr. Rex Reverdon was considerably taken aback, and did not know, at first, how to answer her. It was true the same suggestion had made itself to him in other words, but not at all with a view to the same results. Here was the woman to gain whom he had been laying himself out for the last month, just as he had secured her, offering herself up a voluntary sacrifice, not at

his feet, but to rid him of herself, if he so willed. And it was what he did not will, as we well know. It was what he could not afford to will either. Added to which there was a certain nobility in her offer which touched the best part of him, for Rex Reverdon knew full well that she loved him dearly. And so, under all circumstances (and knowing *what men are*), it is not surprising that his answer, when it did come, said a great deal more than it really meant.

“My dear girl,” he began, “do you know you’re talking a great deal of nonsense?”

She had expected a grandiloquent answer to her grandiloquent address, but this familiar caressing form of speech was the very one best calculated to soothe her wounded feelings, and allay her fears. Rex had never spoken to her in such a tender way before, and the name he used to call her by seemed a contradiction in itself, to any supposition on her part, that he acquiesced in his step-father’s opinion or hers. A look of intense pleasure passed over her face as the words left his lips, but she did not speak.

“I knew your age before I spoke to you of marriage, Isobel. Do you think I am such a child as not to know my own mind upon the

subject? Don't you remember you told me, that last evening party at Mrs. Peyton's, that you were thirty?"

"Oh, yes; I remember," exclaimed Isobel, as that evening and all its wonderful new delights rushed back upon her imagination.

"So you see I knew all about it, and it made no difference to me. Why should you begin to talk to me now about stopping to consider and sounding my heart?"

"But I am afraid you may not have thought of the consequences," commenced Isobel again; "it seems as if I was doing you an injury to link myself to you for life, when, as Lady Charlotte says, you will be a young man still when I am an old woman. Think of that, Reginald. It does not signify so much now, but ten years hence—how will it be then?"

Reginald did think, and the thought made him almost shudder. If he could have got out of it, would he not? but there was no other chance. He kept repeating that over and over in his own mind, "no other chance." If she could have only read his thoughts, poor Isobel; but she judged from his words and actions alone, and for her, too, there came "no other

chance.” He was silent for a moment, and then he said, while she seemed to hang upon his words :

“ Well, I have thought, Isobel ; I have looked forward beyond those dreadful ten years, and I see nothing to frighten me there. You say that you are afraid I proposed to you without thinking of all this. Well, now, I have done so ; and I say again, will you have me for a husband ? and what is your answer ? ”

“ Oh, Reginald, you know my answer before it is spoken,” she said, a happy mist before her eyes. “ I did not say it for myself, I thought it a duty that I owed to you ; but if you have no fears, I have none, my *dearest Rex*, ” she added, looking fondly round at him as she spoke.

Rex felt as if he had escaped a danger, she had really seemed so much in earnest. He had not been quite sure if she meant to take the law into her own hands, and pronounce a decree *nisi* between them ; and, on the repetition of her promise he breathed again. His spirits rose considerably in consequence, and he was very anxious to make amends for his previous silence. He again reverted to the subject they had discussed together in the morning.

"About that money for the boy's schooling, Isobel; I hope you quite understood me to say that I wished it paid as usual after our marriage. You had better settle all that with your brother-in-law. Hadn't you better pay for both the elder boys? It will only be for a few years."

"Oh! no," said Isobel, "pray don't suggest such a thing, dear Reginald. To have the expenses of Robert's schooling taken off their hands will be an immense help for them, and quite as much as we ought to give. In fact, I am not sure yet whether we are bound to do as much as that. I have thought several times since this morning that I was foolish to mention it to you."

"But I wish it done," returned Rex, with energy; "and if you do not mention it to Mr. Peyton, Isobel, I shall; but of course it would come better from you. *I* couldn't touch on the subject until after we are married."

"How kind of you, Rex—how generous,—I scarcely like to accept it from you."

So, even at this early time she took the disposal of her own money as a favour at his hands, and glorified him in her mind for liberality worthy of such a princely giver. After that

they were soon at home again, and he parted with her for the night. His last words whispered in the hall were,

“Remember, Isobel, that I can’t hear of any alteration of dates; I hold you to the 15th of next month, and shall make all my arrangements accordingly.”

So he wouldn’t give her up, not even delay the marriage; her offered sacrifice had been in vain: yet not in vain, Isobel thought, as she remembered the assurances it had drawn forth from him. In her own room that night she set him down as the most noble, most generous of men.

“How well he bore those horrible remarks about Mr. Clare,” she thought: “how little he seemed to mind them. He must love me if he can stand ridicule for my sake: men are so sensitive to anything like being laughed at. How glad I am that I do not look older than I do; that I am not very fat, or have lost my hair or teeth; I will always dress young as long as I can, that the difference in our ages may not be remarked upon. Dear Reginald, my dear generous-hearted Rex, how cheerfully he agreed to this business about Bob’s schooling; and I am

sure he didn't like the idea at first, and yet he gave in,—and not only so, but gave in with an appearance of liking to give in, which is what so few people can do ; but Rex is as nearly perfection, I think, as mortal man can be. Oh, what have I done to deserve such happiness? How can I ever be grateful enough to heaven? Oh God, make me worthy to be his wife, and give me grace to love him and make him as happy as myself!"

And in her prayers, she thus poured out all her innocent heart, as she wept with gratitude to think she was to fill so high a place of honour as becoming the wife of one of the wildest men about town, albeit there was a vein of goodness running through all his vice, which might yield largely if she had the tact to find out how to work it. In her eyes, though, the vein was already found,—not only a vein, but a whole mine of rich ore ready worked, only waiting for her, proud and happy settler, to gather up and enrich herself with for life. If she thought so, she was justified in making the attempt.

Now if there are any stupid people who want to stop me at this juncture with insane questions concerning the why and the wherefore that

Isobel Fane, being a sensible woman, thus deceived herself into believing that Rex Reverdon married her for herself, and not for her money, when she had been expressly warned to the contrary, all I can say is that I am in a hurry, and therefore my answer must be brief. Take it in the shape of another question.

Have you ever been in love ?

If so, and you were not perfectly moonstruck, you must have been aware that Mr. Brown or Miss Robinson, did not appear the same to you as to other people. You may have overheard Jones say at an evening party that her eyes were green, and you may timidly have acknowledged that Jones was right ; and yet, did Miss Robinson's eyes appear green to you next time you saw them ? Brown's hair may be bright carrots, but if his lady love is forced against her will to confess the truth, she will still maintain that carrots are the vegetables most suited to herself. We often hear people say, under such circumstances, when cruelly reminded that the adored of their soul is uneducated, or squints, or is a widower with a large family—“ I know it, well enough, but I like him (or her, as the case may be) all the better for it.” And all hail to them, I say,

for the sentiment. If those who love us cannot tolerate our faults, who will? And if love is not an excuse for every shortcoming of our own, let us leave off making excuses altogether. But then what stands good in the case of Brown, Jones, and Robinson, must stand good in the case of my heroine. Rex Reverdon did not happen to squint, or to have carrots (at least, not the real genuine article), or to be a widower, but he had something else to be pulled to pieces for; and who has not? He was wild and thoughtless, he was extravagant, and accused of wanting money.

Isobel Fane knew it all: and though I do not go quite so far as to say she liked him the better for his sins, I do maintain that, in consequence of them, so deep a pity mingled with her love that the more he was run down and abused by the Peyton's the higher rose her determination to let them and the world see that one woman could love and trust him without measure. It was acting upon this principle that, a few mornings after the visit to Wimbledon, she stopped her brother-in-law, on rising from the breakfast table.

“Can you spare me a few minutes, Fred? I want to speak to you alone.”

Mr. Peyton, not being a man in great requisition in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, thought he could spare her a few minutes, and followed her into his study in consequence.

When they were seated she opened the conversation without the slightest hesitation. She looked like a very calm, sensible woman of business as she did so.

“Fred, my thirty thousand pounds were left to me absolutely, were they not, by my godmother?”

“Yes, Isobel, certainly,” replied Mr. Peyton, scarcely knowing to what her preamble was to lead.

“The will I made after poor Harold’s death you drew up for me, so you know that the greater part of my money was left to your wife and children and dear Charlie; but that must be altered now, of course.”

“Of course,” echoed Mr. Peyton. He had known this must come, but he didn’t like it any the better for the fore-knowledge.

“Who it will go to eventually, one cannot tell; but, in the prospect of my marriage, I want you to destroy that will for me, and draw up a settlement instead.”

"It ought to be settled on you and your heirs, Isobel," he remarked.

She shook her head impatiently.

"I don't know about 'ought'; the money is my own, to do what I like with, and I wish it settled, without reserve, upon Mr. Reverdon."

"*What?*" exclaimed her brother-in-law, every hair on his head standing up on end with horror.

"I wish you to draw up a deed, Fred, settling my thirty thousand pounds upon my future husband; you know his name, don't you? Reginald Hopeaway Reverdon."

"But, Isobel, this is monstrous. I cannot consent to it; to place the money entirely in Mr. Reverdon's power, to have no control over it yourself, no security in case of children; it is perfect madness; you cannot know what you are talking about, what you are proposing to do."

"Know?" she answered; "I know as well as you do, Fred, that such a deed will place every shilling of my money as a gift in my husband's hands, and that he may spend it all the next day, if he chooses."

"Which he will do, in all probability," said Mr. Peyton. "Why, Isobel, he bets frightfully;

he lost all his own money on the turf; he is a most dangerous man to trust. You'll lose every penny of it, as sure as you sit there."

"If I do," she replied, "I may thank yourself for it. I should never have thought of this if you had not assailed me ever since my engagement to this man with hints that he only wants me for my money, and prophesies that he will throw it all away. There's not a soul trusts him by your account, every one (even his own mother I believe) gives him credit for being incapable of acting rightly or fairly, even by the woman he marries. If every one is against him it behoves me, who love him so dearly, to make a decided stand, lest I am classed against my will with those who do not trust him. I *do* trust him, Fred, and I will show him and the world so, not by empty words, but by deeds, as far as I am able. I have such faith in him and in his honour that I can trust him with this money, which you think so much of—and trust him absolutely. It shall be his, every penny of it, before our wedding-day, and then we shall see which is right and which is wrong."

"And suppose, I prove right?" suggested Mr. Peyton.

"Then God help me," said Isobel, sadly. "I shall have lost my trust, and I do not care how soon the money goes after it. But there is no chance, not the shadow of a chance of it, Fred," she added, firing up again; "and if there was, I'd risk it. Draw up the settlement for me as I tell you; but don't say anything about it, please, to Mr. Reverdon."

"But if he should ask me?" urged Mr. Peyton. "We were speaking of your money matters only yesterday, and Mr. Reverdon quite agreed with me that it should be settled upon your children, and tied down so that he cannot touch the principal."

"Dear, generous Rex," said Isobel, warmly; "do you think *that* looks like squandering all my money away? Fred, you don't know him as I do, or you wouldn't do him such injustice as even to think of such a thing."

Mr. Peyton shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. His was doubtless the shrewder character of the two, but I cannot think it the most noble. However, he had prudence upon his side, and his business certainly was, as far as he could, to look after his sister-in-law's money. Though whether it was not six for her and half-

a-dozen for himself remains an unanswered question to this day. Any way, he made another effort to turn her mind.

“ But, since Mr. Reverdon sees the sense of it, Isobel, don’t you think it would be better after all to have the settlement made upon you and your heirs? Your husband would still have the benefit of the interest for his lifetime.”

But her generous intentions had been fanned into an ardent flame by his last words regarding her intended husband, and she would not hear of anything short of the entire sacrifice.

“ No,” she repeated, “ I wish the deed drawn up exactly as I at first said, Fred : that I settle the whole of my money, absolutely, and without reserve, upon Reginald Hopeaway Reverdon, without any conditions whatever. Now is that plain enough? After we are married he can do as he likes with it, but it shall be his to do with as he likes. Then, if he chooses to settle it upon me, it will be my husband’s gift and not my money.”

“ Very romantic, I dare say,” grumbled Mr. Peyton, “ but a great deal of trouble, nevertheless ; two deeds to be made out in-

stead of one. I wish you would think twice of it, Isobel."

"Twice, or two hundred, would make no difference to me, Fred. I am quite determined, and you know when I have once made up my mind I do not easily change it."

This was true enough, and so he prepared to leave the room without further comment.

"You shall have the deed in a few days," he said ; "but I hope you won't deliver it over to Mr. Reverdon before the marriage."

She looked wonderfully contemptuous at his infidelity, but stopped him before he left her.

"To prove to you, Fred, that Mr. Reverdon is not *quite* so grasping as you so charitably seem to imagine, he wishes me to tell you that after we are married he would still like me to go on paying for Bob until he leaves school ; of course hoping that you will accept it as a joint gift from us, and that you will believe that if we could have done more we would. Indeed, Reginald wanted to promise to pay for both the elder boys, but I was sure that was more than you would like to accept from us."

Isobel said the latter words out of politeness, with more politeness than truth I am afraid ;

for both the Peytons were of that grasping and unrefined nature that will take anything, as much as ever it can get, and feel no delicacy about the matter either.

But this little proposal really did come very apropos to Mr. Peyton. He had no business to be ill-tempered about it, but he had certainly reason to dread the flight of his sister-in-law from his roof-tree. Sixty pounds a year deducted from the elder children's schooling was sixty pounds a year in the younger children's mouths, and without doubt would be a great help to him. But to accept any obligation gracefully from a person with whom you have been at daggers drawn for the last month (for it had been little less than this between Isobel and her brother-in-law) is not easy to do, and Mr. Peyton was an awkward little man at the best of times. So he shuffled about a good deal at the news, said he was sure it was very kind of Mr. Reverdon and Isobel to think of it, and that his son Robert would have reason to be very grateful to them for it (he would not acknowledge the obligation as one to himself), and then shuffled out of the room altogether, and left her standing there alone.

CHAPTER III.

REX HAS AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

IF Isobel Fane's happiness had depended upon the sympathy she met with in Torrington Square, it would certainly have had but a frail tenure, for her sister gave her still less than did Mr. Peyton. Ever since the day on which she had expressed her determination to marry Rex Reverdon, Fanny had behaved to her as if she had committed a crime too bad to mention, but of which it was fit she should be hourly reminded by a method of silent reproach, which was mixed up with everything she said or did. The only ones in Torrington Square who rejoiced with Isobel at her new prospects were the servants; and from them she received the heartiest congratulations; and Mary, the house-maid (with whom she was an especial favourite), had been heard to declare downstairs, that it

was “the next best thing to being married herself.” But, in the meanwhile, Isobel cared very little for the dearth of good wishes for her happiness; she felt too sure of it. When, a few days after, she received the ponderous-looking deed which set forth in so many sheets of parchment, and such incomprehensible words, the simple, loving truth, that she could trust the man with her money with whom she was not afraid to trust herself, she could have cried with joy that she had it in her power to give her beloved one such a proof of her faith in him. And I think she was foolish enough to sleep with it under her pillow, regardless of her own comfort, that she might see it the first thing in the morning, and try to picture to herself how he would look when she placed it in his dear hands.

The summer days flew on to Isobel rapidly and happily, notwithstanding that all the preparations for her wedding had to be looked after by herself. One might have supposed that Fanny, foolish as she was, would have taken a little interest in her sister’s trousseau. Women are not often such fools as not to know the difference between an ugly dress and

a pretty one; and neither was Mrs. Peyton, but she was sulky, and jealous of Isobel's prospects, and continually maintained an air of martyrdom, which must have been anything but cheering to the bride-expectant. Fanny would take interest in nothing: had no choice when appealed to; no advice to give on the relative merits of glacé or moiré antique; no idea whether blue or pink would suit Isobel's complexion best. It was disheartening work even to ask her opinion, and her sister soon dropped doing so.

But there was one friend who took the most vivid interest in everything that concerned the marriage of Isobel Fane; to whom all her little secrets were told; all her accounts of Rex's beauty, Rex's genius (I am not quite sure where that existed, except in her own imagination), and Rex's virtues detailed; and who was never tired of listening, believing, and shopping with her. And this was, of course, Miss Burnett. Isobel had even on one occasion decoyed Rex to the old lady's lodgings to be introduced to her, where he had sat for half an hour, looking and feeling very uncomfortable, and very little at his ease—almost afraid that Miss Burnett

might take him for a good young man, and commence to question him in the Catechism ; at the end of which time, having clapped his hat on his head and bolted, he had never been lured within a mile of the street in which she lived again. But that short visit was sufficient for Isobel : Miss Burnett had seen her god ; she could judge now for herself ; and thence-forward, as she praised his personal appearance, his manners, and his language, her pupil's cheeks would glow with the fulness of her content, and she would smother her old governess with kisses in return.

And so, between shopping and talking with Miss Burnett, and driving and riding with Rex Reverdon, the days slipped one after another, and the 14th of July dawned, notwithstanding all Mrs. Peyton's sulks and Mr. Peyton's pepperiness.

It was the day before the wedding, and the deed of settlement was still in Isobel's possession. A dozen times she wanted to give it to her lover : a dozen times she had hesitated from shyness. Would he be pleased, or would he be proud and angry ? She could scarcely say. As yet she knew so little of his heart.

She had cautioned her brother-in-law not to disclose her secret to Rex—to stave off his questions with an assertion that the deed of settlement was drawn up, but not to tell him its contents. This had satisfied Rex for awhile, but on the morning of the 14th he surprised Mr. Peyton by walking into his office, and, without further preamble, saying that he had come to look over the deed himself.

"I suppose it had better be signed this evening, Peyton; so I'll just run over it first. I conclude you have it here."

But Mr. Peyton explained that he had not got it there; for it was in Miss Fane's possession.

"The rough draft?"

"No; the rough draft had been destroyed."

Which was a lie, for it was in the drawer before which he sat. But the fact is, Mr. Peyton, with all his bullying, was a little afraid of his sister-in-law, and preferred soiling his own conscience to breaking his word to her; which was very generous of him, as it was sufficiently laden already—as all lawyers' are.

"You had better run round to Torrington Square, Mr. Reverdon, and ask Miss Fane

for the deed yourself. You ought to see it before the marriage took place.”

Mr. Peyton was earnest in saying this, because he thought it more likely that Rex Reverdon would object to the settlement if he saw it before marriage, than after—and so far he proved right. But he wished it altered for his own sake, not for Isobel’s; he thought that more of the money was likely to find its way into his hands, from hers, than from Rex Reverdon’s; and in this, I am glad to think, he proved afterwards to have utterly defeated his own purpose.

“Of course,” answered Rex, “we ought both to read it over. There’s nothing like making sure of a thing. Well, I’ll wish you good-morning then, as to-day is likely to prove a busy one.” And sauntering out of the office as he spoke, half an hour afterwards found him in the Torrington Square drawing-room, waiting to see Miss Fane. She ran down to him, flushed from his sudden arrival, in a light morning dress, which showed off her beautiful figure to great advantage. As she entered the room, Rex could not help remembering his friend Halkett’s words respecting her, and his inward thought was, “Well, hang me, if ever I saw a woman

better built." Her dainty waist, above which her rounded bust so beautifully rose, was clasped with a band and buckle, which seemed as though it could have rivalled that far-famed one of the Empress of Austria. As she came close to him, he could not resist placing his two big hands around it to see if they would meet. "Here's a thing to call a waist," he said, as he did so; and her pleasure shone out of her eyes and on her cheeks at his remark, for his compliments to her were very few and far between. But when he added—

"I've come to see the marriage settlement, Isobel" (he had learnt by this time to call her by her name), she coloured still more, though from a different cause. She actually trembled at the idea of having to tell him of her generosity.

"Oh, why?" she asked; "dear Rex, there's lots of time for that, surely."

"It must be signed and sealed before the marriage takes place, Isobel; and I suppose you have not forgotten that is to be to-morrow."

No, I don't think she had forgotten it.

Sundry clouds of carmine, which appeared first on either cheek, and then mounted up to

the parting of her hair, seemed to uphold his supposition.

“ You won’t be able to understand it,” she next demurred.

“ So that’s your opinion of my ability, is it ?” he said, laughing ; “ I dare say it will be Greek to me, but I must wade through it all the same, so fetch it at once and let me begin.”

“ Must I really ?” she again asked.

“ Why, what have you done with it,” he then said, surprised at her evident reluctance to produce the deed ; “ I believe you’ve lost it, Isobel, and are afraid of discovery.”

“ No, indeed I have not,” she replied, “ it is safe enough. You shall have it, Rex, since you wish it ;” and she left the room as she spoke. Whilst she was gone he walked up to the mantel-piece and looked at himself in the glass, humming as he did so. He felt really quite in spirits this morning. All his debts were settled —that was one great load off his mind. He had nothing left, it is true, but to-morrow he should come into fifteen hundred a year, and start clear. He was almost impatient for to-morrow ; impatient to feel himself quite safe. And he could hum, under the anticipation of

it. Perhaps the dainty waist—still more, I would believe, the loving looks of a pure woman—had something to do with his humming. Anyway he was in higher spirits to-day than he could have conceived it possible for him to be. But then, since the hour he had parted with her, he had never set eyes again upon Pearl Ashton. He had studiously avoided all approach to the little house at Islington. And though it may sound very treasonable to love to have to write it down, we all know that absence *has* something to do with these matters. And Rex Reverdon's feeling for Pearl Ashton was a passion, not a true love, and therefore absence had a good deal to do with it. He had resolutely kept away. He had shown great command over himself in this respect, notwithstanding all Halkett's sneers at him and Halkett's laughter. Though even that gentleman had thought it best to let Rex have his own way for a while, after the scene which took place between them in the café. You see Rex was trying to do right. He may fail hereafter—who knows? My story will tell you that by-and-bye; but we have all failed in our turn, and no one can do more than try. Remember so much for him, if his future

actions do not please you. The idea that he was injuring Miss Fane by marrying her, with his present feelings, had ceased to trouble him. She loved him evidently, and would be very unhappy if he did not fulfil his engagement with her. So he argued with himself, and was at rest. A short rest, and to be soon broken. Let him sleep whilst he may.

Isobel returned to the drawing-room still in a state of carmine, and placed the parchments in her lover's hands.

“ Confound these sharks !” he said ; “ who do they expect to wade through this ? Can't you give me an epitome of it, Isobel ? Have you read it ?”

“ Yes,” she answered.

“ And I suppose it's all right,” he went on, as he unfolded the deed, “ settles your money on yourself and your heirs. Halloa ! what's this about me ?” he added, as the name of Reginald Hopeaway Reverdon, of the second part, stood out in old English characters of an inch high, and caught his attention. He was lounging across a sofa, and she came up at this juncture, and sat down near him.

“ Look here, dear,” she said, very hurriedly,

and as if she was confessing a fault, “it’s not just what you think it—it’s not settled on me ; it’s all the same thing though. I thought it better I——. Look here, Rex dear, it’s settled on you—it’s all the same thing, you know.”

Her words tumbled out one after another pell-mell, as she kept on repeating herself ; and her colour rose to keep pace with her tongue.

Rex Reverdon’s blue eyes grew perfectly round with astonishment.

“*What do you say ?*” he exclaimed. “Settled on *who* ?”

“On you,” she answered, timidly, and then, as if to deprecate his anger, she added, “Oh, Reginald ! won’t you take it from me ? It’s the only thing I have to give you. I shall be so unhappy if you don’t.”

“On *me* !” he repeated. “You’ve settled all your money on *me*, Isobel !”

“What is it ?” she rejoined. “What does it signify if it belongs to you or to me, Rex ? It ought to be yours—entirely yours, since I am to be so too.”

Rex Reverdon rose from the sofa and walked to the mantel-piece. There she followed him, fearing he was vexed at what she had done.

“ You are not angry, Rex ? ” she said.

“ Angry ? ” he repeated. “ Isobel, you are too good for me. I am not worthy to marry you.”

Yes ! if at any time Rex Reverdon felt that he was doing her a wrong, it was now. If he had loved her, how different it would have seemed, but for his want of love, her hourly actions seemed to reproach him. For the first time he felt sorry that he did not. For the first time, perhaps, he felt almost as if he could. But not loving her, but marrying her for the sake—the convenience—of this money, which her generosity placed in his hands as a free gift, because she thought she had received his heart in exchange.

No ! Rex Reverdon was wild, thoughtless, unprincipled—everything, perhaps, that was bad ; but he wasn’t *this* ; he wasn’t what he would have been if he had taken this woman’s gift, as she wished him to take it—as she had given it—as an offering of love to love. It would have been a silent acknowledgment (or so it seemed to him) that he loved her as she loved him. Had he done so, it would have been nothing ; not doing so, he felt as if the devil tempted him to swindle. When he spoke to

her again, it was very kindly, but with firmness.

“ My dear Isobel, I cannot let this settlement stand.”

She was disappointed, and yet not disappointed. She would have given him everything she possessed, and had he taken it would have called him nothing less than man, but to refuse was more than manly, it was god-like in its generosity. Yet still she urged him :

“ Dear Rex, it is nothing—whether I have the control of it, or you. If you wanted it at any time, you would only have to ask for it; it can make no difference.”

“ It must neither be under your control nor mine,” he said ; “ it must not even be in your power to give to me. You have made this settlement in my name, Isobel ; I thank you for it. I don’t know how to thank you as I ought. I shall never forget that you have done it ; but you must let me have it altered, and at once. Your money——”

“ Your money, you mean,” she said.

“ Well, *my* money, then——must be settled upon you and your children, so that we cannot, neither of us, touch the principal. I am an im-

prudent, extravagant fellow, Isobel—I am afraid you do not understand yet how imprudent and extravagant—and I could not trust myself with the entire control of your fortune. You forget that I have thrown away my own already.”

“I forget everything,” she murmured, “excepting that you are the dearest and most generous-hearted of men.”

“Don’t, Isobel,” he said, nervously, “please don’t speak to me like that; I am not worthy to be your husband, as I said before; but if you will have me, you must make the best of your bad bargain.”

Much need to tell the enraptured woman that, as she stood by him, listening to his words as if they proceeded from the mouth of a hero.

“I must leave you now,” he said, presently, “for I must get Peyton to set his clerks about this at once; but I will come back, Isobel, and spend the evening with you; our last evening as two people, remember.”

Mr. Peyton was not at all sorry, as you may suppose, to see Rex Reverdon re-enter his chambers with the deed in question, and order it to be drawn up in a different form.

Rex did not waste many words upon the why and wherefore of the change, for his future brother-in-law was no favourite of his, but he begged Mr. Peyton to put it in hand at once; and have it forwarded to him, wherever he might be, as soon as it was finished. Then his mind felt more at rest, and he strolled homewards to give his servant some final orders about his packing, and joined the party in Torrington Square at the dinner hour. There he spent a contented evening, the last contented one he was to spend for some time.

Sauntering homewards to his club chambers about ten o'clock at night, his cigar between the lips upon which Isobel had left her last maiden kiss, he felt a serenity which had been so unknown to him of late that it came almost as a stranger feeling. He had promised his fiancée, laughingly, that this night he would rest quietly in his bed, and not lay in a pair of bloodshot eyes, and a pale face, wherewith to greet her at the altar of St. George's on the following morning. And, as he took his way home, he fully intended to fulfil his promise. Indeed so determined was he to be "good for once," that he had already decided that as soon as he reached

his chambers he would despatch a line to Halkett, to tell him not to expect him to have his final pipe and glass of grog with him that evening, as he had previously engaged himself to do. It did not take him long to reach his club on that fine July night. The head-waiter was surprised to see Mr. Reverdon walk in so early, but he thought he knew the reason. It was early hours for the members of the “Waterloo” to return to their nests, the generality of them not being particularly fond of their beds. The club itself was at the very height of its daily bustle and business. Every room was blazing with light, and through the open curtained windows you could hear the calls for the waiter, demands for favourite beverages, and the clatter of knives and forks, as its members despatched their “petits soupers.” The vestibule was crowded with fashionables, to all of whom Rex Reverdon was known, but he passed them on the present occasion, with little more than a recognition. Some were about to detain him, others to call him back, but the wiser of the party restrained their attempts.

“Leave the poor devil alone, can’t you?” they said, with looks in which the deepest com-

passion, mingled with a species of awe, was blended ; such looks as one might regard a passenger with, who was about to cross the river Styx. " You know he's to be turned off to-morrow. He wants to be alone and meditate."

" I should think that would be the worst thing possible under the circumstances," remarked one of the group : " if we let him do that, we shall find him with his throat cut to-morrow morning."

And then one or two jokes were bandied about, which were very amusing, no doubt, and very applicable to the occasion, but scarcely suitable for me to write down here. But Rex the while was quite unaware that he was amusing his friends with so little trouble to himself. He had walked through the first vestibule and reached the second, the staircase of which led to his own apartments, when the head-waiter approached him, napkin in hand, with an air of great mystery, and a muffled voice—

" If you please, Sir," he said, " there's been a young person waiting to see you for some time in your room ; I thought——"

" In my room ! A young person !" exclaimed Rex. " Who is it ? "

“ I am not aware, Sir ; the young woman gave no name. She said she wished to see Mr. Reverdon, and hearing you were out, requested to be shown to your private room. I thought it was all right, Sir ; the young person seemed to know your name so well.”

“ And what the devil do you mean,” exclaimed Rex, wrathfully, “ by showing any one who chooses to come here and ask for me to my room ? How do you know it mayn’t be a common thief, and all my things lying about ? I know no more of who it can be than the deuce.”

“ I am very sorry, Sir,” commenced the man ; “ but I thought—I made sure —”

“ You have no business to think,” rejoined Rex, hastily, as he took two steps at a time in his ascent up the staircase ; “ you’ll not act another time, if you please, without my orders. Who on earth can it be ?” he thought to himself, at the same time that he spoke to the waiter.

Visions of unpaid housemaids, cooks wanting characters, appeals for future service, rushed through his mind without satisfying its curiosity, mixed up with one or two names, whose fair

owners were acquainted with himself, if not with his abode, but whom he had no desire to see there.

“Who the devil can know I am here?” were the last words he said to himself, as he reached the door of his own apartments, and turned the handle. It opened with a touch, and he entered the room.

Yes, the servant was right; there was a “young person” waiting for him there—a woman with her shawl and bonnet laid aside, her flaxen hair streaming about her shoulders.

“Good God, Pearl!” he exclaimed, “*you* here!”

He was so utterly astonished that he could say no more than this, and then stare at her. Even in his surprise, however, his first thought was for her,—for he turned and locked the door to prevent any intruders upon their interview.

She had risen from her chair at his address, and stood confronting him. She marked the wild stare in his eyes, the pallor which had overspread his face, the quivering of his lips, and saw that he was still hers.

“Yes, it is I,” she said. “Why shouldn’t I be here? I came to take a last look at you

before I lose sight of you for ever. My last protector goes in you, Rex. I am alone now in the world ; my father died this morning.”

“Your father!” exclaimed he. “How?”

Hitherto he had felt disposed to resent the intrusion of her presence ; but as she burst upon him with this news, so sudden and unexpected, all other feelings were merged in the idea that she was in trouble, and as he spoke, he quitted his position at the door, and drew nearer to her.

“He had been ill for days,” she answered, “with his old complaint—you know what it was, delirium tremens—and to-day it killed him. Of my two protectors now one is about as much use to me as the other. Dead or false—which does it signify ?”

“No—not false, Pearl; if you mean me, I am not false.”

“Are you not to be married to-morrow?” she said. “Were you not going to leave England without a farewell word? How much have you seen of me during the last month? Is that faith ?”

“Pearl, Pearl, don’t torture me,” said Rex ; “you know the reason for my marriage—the reason for my keeping away. I have not de-

ceived you. It has been a hard struggle with me not to see you ; but I don't think, if I had, that I could have gone through with this business. How did you know it was to be to-morrow ?"

" Your friend, Mr. Halkett, told me, Rex. Do you think I could know it, and keep quiet—hear it, and sit down silently at home with that dead man ? Know you were to be gone to-morrow, and not have one parting word from you ?"

He had sunk down in a chair by this time, and leaning over the table, had hidden his face in his hand. Where were all the good resolutions gone ? Where the new serenity he was content to enjoy half an hour before ? Where the satisfaction in the contemplation of his marriage with Isobel Fane ? All vanished —fled away before the influence of this false woman, the glance of her meretricious eyes, the sound of her inflexible, metallic voice. The sight of Elizabeth Ashton had brought back all his old feelings with redoubled force. He felt as if some one had suddenly emptied a quantity of cold water over him, and he felt sick and trembled.

" Rex," she said, coming up to him, and

laying her hands about him, “Rex, *don’t* you love me?”

Still covering his eyes, lest the sight of her charms should blind him, still trying to gather up a little moral courage beneath the shelter of his hands, Rex Reverdon kept his face where it had been.

“*Don’t* you love me?” she went on to say. “Are you angry with me, Rex, for coming here? Could I let you go without one kiss, or word of affection,—I—who would lie down and die for you? Rex, speak to me!”

Then he turned towards her, and she looked so true, her attitude was so despairing as she writhed about his feet—a second Vivien—that his courage broke down, and he held out his arms. When she was in them, when her heart was against his, her eyes upturned to meet his own, then the citadel was hers. He had opened the gates, and the enemy had marched in to claim a victory earned by stratagem.

“Pearl,” he murmured, as he passionately caressed her, “*don’t* I love you, my own, my darling, my true Pearl, who cannot forget me through weeks of neglect and unkindness? Oh, dear! how I have longed for you! How I have

thirsted for a look, for a kiss, for a word, during these weary weeks ! but it would have been madness to have sought them since they must never be mine again. This is madness, Pearl—madness in you to come here, in me to hold you thus ; but it is for the last, last time. Oh, Pearl—my Pearl!"

He did not weep, but a burning pain rose up behind his eyeballs, and seemed to scorch and blister them. He did not groan, but as he hid his face against hers, he suffered more than any groans could tell of.

"Pearl," he murmured, "if you were not true to me, I could not love you as I do ; but I am the only man you care for, and you the only woman that I love ! Oh, Pearl ! why did I not risk everything, so long as we two passed a life of happiness together ?"

"It might be, still," she whispered, as her soft lips touched his. But even as they did so, and sent a thrill of fire through his frame, another voice, a sweeter, better voice, and just as loving, sounded in his heart, a voice which said —"I forget everything but that you are the dearest and most generous of men ;" and as he heard it, or seemed to hear it, his moment of

weakness passed, and he turned his head away. He turned his lips from the touch of hers; he untwined the arms which clung about him; he rose and left her, kneeling by the chair.

“No more of this!” he exclaimed, passionately. “Pearl! What right have you to tempt me with your sorceries? what business have you to come here, and take what is another woman’s? I have avoided you, I have kept clear of you hitherto: is a man’s room not his own that he is to be followed there and tempted by the devil, till he sins against his will? Go home! I won’t look at you, I won’t touch you again, I cannot trust myself, ever with the knowledge of right, in my heart!”

The woman’s face had changed with his change of manner, but she did not show her surprise except by the tone of her voice.

“How long have you been practising these outbursts of virtue?” she said, sarcastically, still kneeling by the empty chair. “I suppose your new flame has been teaching you how to declaim, and how to love her at the same time!”

“I almost thought she had, this afternoon,” he answered, sadly, “but if so the sight of you has undone her work already!”

A look of satisfaction passed over the face of Elizabeth Ashton, but it did not last long.

"You have a great deal to answer for, Pearl," he added, though without anger; "you know my weakness, and you trade upon it. I have made a dozen resolutions since we parted, but one look of yours can put them all to flight. I believe you are the very devil himself."

Not pleasant words for any one to hear even though they are merited, and spoken by a person to whom we are indifferent. Elizabeth Ashton felt them, hardened as she was, for her pale cheeks flushed, and she rose from her kneeling attitude and commenced to reassume her bonnet and shawl.

"You are complimentary," was all she said, as she prepared to leave the room; "good-night, Mr. Reverdon."

But he could not let her go thus. He cared too much for her character. The staircase and vestibule were very public and crowded, and she wore no veil.

"Forgive me, Pearl!" he said; "but you try me too hard; I cannot let you go like this, not until I have settled something definite about

your future. You cannot live alone, what do you intend to do?”

“I am going on the stage,” she answered ; “the manager of the Prince’s Theatre has offered me employment. I shall earn enough, at all events, to keep bread in my mouth, and perhaps I may find a market for the wares you despise, who knows ?”

The woman hit him hard there, and she knew it, and meant to do so. He bit his lip, but restrained himself from noticing her last remark.

“Not on the stage, Pearl,” he urged ; “anything but that. I’ll make you twice the allowance that Jones will offer you, if you will only stay at home. You are a great deal too pretty to be an actress with safety. It is a dangerous position, I should tremble for you, Pearl. Pray think of something else !”

“You tremble for *me*,” she answered, “who have not a scruple in leaving me altogether. Don’t talk such nonsense ; I must learn to take care of myself.”

What could he say, unless he forgot himself and transgressed on forbidden grounds again ? Yet all his love for her went out in one last entreating cry.

"Oh, Pearl! take care of yourself, for *my* sake!"

"Why are you so cruel to me," she said, "since you love me?"

"I am not cruel, child," he answered, sadly; "it is the truest kindness for both of us, since we can never be more to one another than we are!"

"Rex, you will not quite desert me? you will sometimes let me see you?"

"Desert you, no, Pearl; if ever you want aid, send to me: but see you, that I cannot promise. I wish I had not seen you to-night. It is so hard to part with you!"

"Oh! let me stay!" she cried.

But Rex was himself again, and his eyes met hers firmly, and his voice was decided.

"You have stayed here too long already, Pearl; you should never have come here. You must let me take you home at once."

She made no further resistance, and he conducted her downstairs, and put her into a cab. He even got in himself, and saw her safely to her own door at Islington, but no more endearments passed between them. When he had parted with her, the cabman waited for his orders. "Drive me to——" he said, mention-

ing one of the cafés in the Strand, “and look sharp about it. I give you fifteen minutes to get there.” And as the cab flew over the jolting stones at his bidding, I am afraid he forgot all about his resolution to go to bed early. Indeed, to tell you the truth, no bed whatever had the honour of his acquaintance that night.

And Elizabeth Ashton sitting in the little house at Islington, with the body of her dead father in the room next to her, what were her thoughts, as she reviewed the circumstance of her visit to the Club Chambers? Repulsion from a lover is not an easy thing for the female heart to bear. If it comes from a man whom she loves truly, it covers her with so bitter a mortification—so burning a shame, that she feels as if she could never bear to stand in his presence again, and the mere remembrance of it will make her blush to herself. But, when the woman does not love, it has a different effect. It had a different effect upon Elizabeth Ashton. The mortification was there, but rage took the place of shame. Rage that she had not more power over him; more power to make him forget what was right, to make him more utterly

miserable in giving her up ; and feeling powerless, for the moment, she hated him.

Yet so bad was she (for I believe Elizabeth Ashton to have been as utterly bad a woman as this world ever produced, for the worst of us have redeeming qualities), that in spite of all her feelings against him, she could yet derive pleasure from the contemplation of a certain banknote for twenty pounds (almost the last ready money which poor Rex could boast of) as she deposited it for safety in her workbox, before she retired to rest.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HAPPY DAY.

WHAT an awful thing it is to think that we mortals have power, by the exercise of our own evil passions, to undo God's work in others ; that we can unravel by our influence the commencement of a web of right which might have gone on, being added to until it was woven into the very life which we aid to drag downwards—not perhaps for ever, for I believe the work of Heaven once begun, no earthly power can really destroy ; but we can hinder it ; we can force our fellow-toilers to commence their work afresh ; we can lay up for them years of remorse and difficulty, the punishment for which I surely believe will come back upon ourselves. For if there is one thing upon which the Supreme Power looks with greater severity than another, it must be when He sees his fallen creatures

striving to keep one another down as they essay to rise.

And yet this is what Elizabeth Ashton had done for Rex Reverdon. She had destroyed the incipient love he was beginning to feel for Isobel Fane. She had rent the pure, delicate fabric in pieces, and interposed instead her own woof of gaudy, staring colours, before which the other paled and faded away. She had renewed her old influence, to be ever ready to battle with the young influence which his promised wife was unwittingly commencing to hold over him, and with it she had renewed the feelings which accompanied it. For though the rawness of his pain at first parting with Pearl had worn off, and he had even commenced to like another, the wound was still very freshly closed. And now he had all the old ground to go over again ; he stood exactly in the same position with respect to Isobel Fane as he had done the day he proposed to her.

I am afraid, as he prepared to meet her at St. George's, Hanover Square, the next morning, that he could not boast himself entirely free from the bloodshot eyes and pale face which he had promised her he would not take as a

wedding gift to the altar. But he had passed a night which was not calculated to produce that kind of countenance which a happy bridegroom should wear. All his mind seemed changed since the day before. As he dressed himself and watched his haggard looks in the glass, he could scarcely believe that he was the same man who had stood humming in the drawing-room in Torrington Square only the afternoon before, and felt, as the generous proposal of his intended wife was being urged upon his acceptance, as if he could *almost* love her. Now all his head and heart were filled with but one idea—the image of Pearl Ashton, and he wondered at himself to think how he could have let it grow dim, even for a day, in his memory. All his endeavours to do right, his nobility of purpose, which was the true language of his heart, seemed to have melted away beneath the renewed influence of a bad woman’s presence. Mr. Halkett, who in his character of “best-man” (there would have been a sorry lot indeed in St. George’s that morning if his name had really fitted him) called to conduct the bridegroom to church, told him downright that he had assisted at many weddings, but he had never had the pleasure of supporting

such a thorough “carry-me-out-and-bury-me-decently” looking article before.

“Why, hang it, man,” he said, “haven’t you got a little paint to put on your cheeks, or a trifle of that innocent crimson lip-salve for your lips that the ladies use *only just* to prevent theirs from chapping, but which leaves them such an uncommonly jolly red colour into the bargain? You look as if you had sent yourself to the wash, and the laundress had soaked you in soda and water all night, as she did my flannel shirts, and taken every bit of the colour out. What have you been doing with yourself? You don’t look at all as if you had been the ‘good boy’ that you pretended you were going to be in your note to me last night. Had any bad news, eh? Has Miss Fane’s fortune proved a myth, or does it revert in case of marriage to her uncle’s fiftieth cousin by the grandmother’s side? I am sure something dreadful has happened by your looks.”

But Rex was in no humour for his friend’s jokes. He was in the humour for nothing, indeed, except to be very much out of humour. He winced as Halkett mentioned Isobel’s name and Isobel’s money in that careless, offhand

manner. He had made the subject of his marriage in conversation too much a matter of bargain and sale ; he had spoken too openly of his own indifference in the matter to know well how to stem the torrent of his friend's free remarks ; but he did observe, rather haughtily, “Please to remember, Halkett, that the lady you speak of will be my wife in another hour.”

And then he said no more. He did not mention the visit he had received from Pearl Ashton. He would have scorned to disclose what he considered a woman's secret to another man. His own feelings, too, on the subject were too deep for general comment ; so he was silent. But he little thought how Henry Halkett saw through his silence, and rightly interpreted his wearied looks. He little thought that the very visit itself had been at the instigation of his friend ; that he had urged Elizabeth Ashton taking the step, because, however much he liked her company himself, he did not like having to pay for it. If Rex Reverdon deserted her, if he left off supplying her with what she wanted, she might come down upon him for money ; who knew ? and the little Mr. Henry Halkett possessed he preferred keeping to himself.

"I'll tell you what it is, Lizzie," he remarked afterwards in confidence to Miss Ashton, "you women can't see two inches before you. Why, the fellow was as cut up the next morning as if he had just been committed for ten years' transportation. What would you have more?"

"Well, he was pretty decided at the last that I should clear out of his chambers, at any rate," was her answer, half-pettishly, half-incredulously given.

Halkett laughed at the idea.

"Of course he was," he said; "do you know so little of men as not to see through that, Lizzie? Why, he was afraid to trust himself with you. No, you take my advice; stick to Rex Reverdon; he'll be the best friend you have yet; for if he doesn't care for you as I do, Lizzie, he's got more of the ready, and as long as he gives you that, you leave the other part to me." And her lip had curled at his remark, showing how very little she cared for the love of either of them.

Could Rex Reverdon only have known or foreseen all this, he would scarcely have said, as he passed his arm through that of his friend on their way to the carriage—

“Well, whatever changes this business makes in my life, I hope it will never make any difference to our friendship, Halkett; for if that was to fail me, I think I really should begin to doubt if such a thing as happiness exists in this world.”

The church of St. George's was not very crowded, either inside or out, when they arrived there. Marriages, which occur at that celebrated place at the rate of three a day, are too common for any one to care to stop to look at them, except a few nursery-maids, to whom brides and bridegrooms are a never-ceasing and ever-fresh source of curiosity, and perhaps a few truant school-boys, or a member of the Shoe Brigade out of employment. And by Isobel's especial request, the wedding was a very quiet one—so quiet that the member of the Shoe Brigade above mentioned, after the last carriage had deposited the bride in the church porch, pronounced the whole affair “the biggest sell as he'd come across that season.” Indeed, with the exception of the immediate friends on both sides, the ceremony was strictly private. Lady Charlotte Huntley, who was a great stickler for the proprieties, alias “*Les bienséances de la société*,” (which was a

phrase for ever in her mouth), was quite scandalized when she understood that Miss Fane intended walking up the aisle without the stereotyped six, eight, or a dozen fair creatures in white and blue, or pink and white, which is one of the first commandments in the decade of "*Les bienséances de la société*."

"So strange it appears to me," she had observed to her son on the occasion, "that Miss Fane should like to go *unsupported* to the altar. You should remonstrate with her, Reginald."

"Miss Fane is quite old enough to walk alone, mother," had been his careless answer; "and if she prefers to do so, to having six simpering fools, thinking of nothing but their own dresses, to come smirking after her, I sha'n't interfere with her wishes."

And Lady Charlotte had said, that really, to speak to Reginald, one would think that he had never been brought up to know what "*Les bienséances de la société*" were.

She was still more shocked, I believe, when Isobel appeared on the morning in question dressed, in open defiance of every law of wedding etiquette, without veil or orange-blossoms—not even in white.

“ Miss Fane looked much more,” she said, “as if she was going to Chiswick or The Oaks than to be married. I declare I felt quite ashamed to see her.”

Whether she was calculated to inspire shame in a mother-in-law’s breast I know not; but I am quite sure that no man who skims these pages need have been ashamed to own her as his bride. Over a slip of the palest French pink, she wore a dress of some cloudy white material, which looked as if it had a dozen skirts, and over which the white lace mantle was so happily arranged that you could not tell where one began and the other ended; and on her head a small white bonnet, which might have been made of anything, it was so crowded and confused with pale-pink roses and rosebuds, both inside and out. And this was the dress in which Isobel Fane chose to change her name, and scandalize her new relations. She had almost laughed at the idea of a wreath and veil.

“ A wreath for *me*?” she had said. “ You must be dreaming, Fanny. I won’t even wear white; it will only direct people’s attention to the difference between my age and Mr. Reverdon’s.”

And, whatever “*Les bienséances de la société*” demand, I think, for my own part, that the men would not be the ones to find fault if their brides sometimes acted somewhat after the fashion of Isobel Fane, and did not make a point of meeting them at the altar like heifers decked out for sacrifice.

What abominable humbugs fashionable weddings have degenerated into in this our enlightened century. Why do we turn the holiest sacrament we have into a mummery and a farce? Would men be less pleased, for instance, if the stereotyped tears were omitted? Is it a compliment to the man you love to meet him in church with red swollen eyes and nose, and to sob incessantly the whole time of the ceremony? You may say that there are in many instances partings to be gone through, and severing of home-ties to be endured; and they are painful. True; but if the coming joy does not outweigh the pain, don’t marry at all. I have seen the dearest friends and relations part in public with apparently perfect composure, and when the separation is to be for years; as, for instance, on board the steamers which fortnightly bear off their burden of aching

hearts from the wharf at Southampton. Why is this? Simply because the friends have wept themselves dry beforehand ; they knew that the opportunity for indulging their feelings was passing from them. Why cannot young ladies do the same? I am afraid there is often little idea in a bride's heart, as her tears pelt down her cheeks, of the coming parting from that very pompous-looking mamma, who is bursting (not from grief) but nearly out of her peach-coloured satin (the dressmaker has made it so abominably tight), by her side, or that puffy papa, who gives her a shove when the clergyman asks who is the donor of the valuable gift before him, and is probably uncommonly glad he has got one of ten off his hands, as he does so. No, I am afraid there is more sentimentality in the act, generally speaking, than anything else. Young ladies think it is right a bride should cry ; it looks modest and interesting, and as if she didn't like being married. But why do the bridesmaids cry? Because they are *not* going to be married, I suppose. I always put it down as such myself. Now I do not intend to say that tears, when they rise spontaneously from deep emotion, are not

the best and greatest proofs of feeling. When the holy, solemn troth is plighted, and a woman feels her lover's hand in hers, and as she hears him repeat his vow after the clergyman, knows that his heart echoes the words from his lips, then, I think, if the tears rise in her eyes, and even fall down her cheeks, that they are the best compliment she can pay him.

They did come in this manner to Isobel's eyes ; and when she knelt by Rex Reverdon's side afterwards, and heard the solemn prayers offered up for a blessing on their union, her heart was very full, and she could scarcely say Amen, although she *felt* it. And then there was a pause, and a blessing, and they stood up again, and heard a few words read, and it was over.

“Is it all done ?” said Rex, quite audibly, appealing to the clergyman ; and the clergyman intimated that it was.

He had gone through the whole ceremony in a dream—a wretched, low-spirited dream ; but that had not been so observable during its progress. Now he stood as not knowing what to do next. A very pretty custom has come in of late years —I allude to that of the husband kissing his new-

made wife at the altar ; I like to see it : it seems like a public acknowledgment that henceforth there is to be a glory instead of a shame in such caresses. The present wedding-party had expected some such thing to happen—Isobel herself had half expected it. She stood, looking up at her husband, as the marriage was concluded, rather shyly, not knowing what he intended to do, her soft, womanly eyes looking still softer than usual from the few happy tears which she had shed. But Rex seemed not to understand what was expected of him, or to have forgotten ; he stood as he had risen, until the clergyman passed out of the altar-rails to the vestry, and the clerk intimated to him that he was to follow. He commenced to do so—by himself—and then he drew back, remembering his bride.

“ Oh, I beg your pardon, Isobel,” he said, as he let her walk before him.

She, dear tender heart, was full of excuses within herself for his omission.

“ He is a man,” she thought ; “ and men are so jealous of anything like a display of affection in public. I am almost glad that he did not do it.”

But Lady Charlotte was not disposed to let the delinquent off so easily.

“Well,” she said, affecting to appeal to Mr. Huntley alone, though all the party heard her, “if Miss Fane is satisfied with that amount of politeness in a bridegroom, I suppose it’s all right; but my opinion is that he behaves more like a bear than anything else; but, however, that’s Reginald all over, he’s exactly like his father and always was.”

This was a usual cry of hers at home whenever poor Rex did something outrageously bad; but one which never met with much sympathy from her auditors, for Mr. Huntley liked his step-son very much and was used to answer—

“Well, my dear, his father must have been an uncommonly fine man then, and you must have got a precious bad exchange in me, I think!”

“That’s all you know about it,” she would answer.

And then Gabriel’s privileged voice perhaps would chime in with the question—

“But why did you marry him then, mamma?” which usually put an extinguisher on the conversation. But on this occasion Mr. Huntley replied, rather gravely—

“ You should make some allowance, Charlotte, for the nervousness due to the occasion. My wife is rather hard upon her son, Mrs. Peyton ; don’t you think so ? She wants her part of the play to be perfection.”

Lady Charlotte was just beginning to make an indifferent rejoinder, when the bride and bridegroom reappeared arm-in-arm from the vestry, and the bells of St. George struck out their best wedding peal. Then there was a hurried getting into carriages, a few streets to be traversed, and they were in the dining-room in Torrington Square, and seated at the wedding breakfast. It was a dreary, unsociable meal, as it always is. The only thing which warmed Isobel’s heart, on re-entering what had been her “home,” was the sight of Gabriel Huntley, already located at the table. He had shrunk from appearing in the church, but his chair had been sent for him expressly from Wimbledon, that he might see the last of his brother. When Isobel went up to kiss him, he exclaimed—

“ Oh, Isobel ! I like you so much for having no fuss about your wedding, and for being dressed so plainly and yet so prettily. Doesn’t she look pretty, Rex ? Turn round and let me see

you on every side. You are the nicest bride I have ever seen yet."

Isobel laughed at his compliments, and said he would turn her head completely.

"You are better than the prettiest," the boy said next, earnestly holding her ungloved hand—"I believe you are the best. You must be if my brother Rex loves you. Isobel, you haven't forgotten what you told me the first day you came to Wimbledon, that you would always love him."

"No, dear," she whispered, "how could I? and on a day like this."

"I was sure you hadn't," he answered; "I am sure you never will cease to do so or to be happy with him, for he is so dear. Rex," he added aloud to his brother, "come to me."

He had been standing by the dingy window, looking over the wire blind into the quiet square, but he turned at the sound of his young brother's voice and came to his side.

"What is it, old Gaby?" he said.

"I have been telling Isobel that I am sure she will be happy. I am sure of it for you, too, brother; for I don't think you could have given

me a dearer sister; I shall think of you so much whilst you are away.”

“Thank you, dear child,” said Rex; and he stooped and kissed his brother’s forehead.

This was just before the breakfast party arrived. As soon as it was over, the Reverdons prepared to go away. Lady Charlotte Huntley also refused to stay longer; so that the dining-room in Torrington Square was soon deserted. This latter lady was anything but pleased with the morning’s performance. She was very hard and critical upon everything and everybody during the rest of the day, and indulged her husband and son with long tirades on the lowness of their new connections. For she had got tired of and accustomed to the idea of Miss Fane being an heiress, and directly Lady Charlotte grew a little weary, her ideas went down-hill with fearful velocity.

“I believe those Peyton’s are *nobody*,” she said. “Did you ever see a woman with less style about her than Mrs. Peyton? Two different blues on her bonnet, I declare, and white satin shoes instead of boots. As for Miss Fane herself, she’s all very well, I dare say, and being an heiress one must look over a little;

but I never saw a marriage in my life conducted with so little regard to '*Les bienséances de la société*'? It might have been a tradesperson's, for the want of style about it. Well, I don't think I shall trouble Torrington Square much."

And in the meanwhile Halkett had handed Mrs. Rex Reverdon into the carriage which was to convey them to the London Bridge Station, on their way to Folkestone; whence they were to embark the following day en route to Paris. As her husband placed himself by her side he put his hand out of the window to grasp that of his friend.

"Good-bye, Halkett;" he said, "I dare say we shall be home before we anticipate now, for a month of Paris is always enough for me. Take care of yourself, old fellow, and (here a firmer pressure of the hand which held his told Halkett what was meant) take care of *all* my friends till I come back. Drive on!"

In the church and at the hurried breakfast Rex Reverdon's want of spirits had not been so much noticed; but as soon as he found himself alone with Isobel, they sunk to such a low ebb, that a wife would have been blind indeed who did not see it. She ignored the

fact at first, and talked cheerfully to her husband, hoping to draw him out of what she considered a transitory fit of the “blues.” But her efforts were unavailing; more than that, she saw they only made matters worse, and therefore she wisely refrained from exerting them. When they reached the station, and were seated in the train, he loaded her with books and newspapers to beguile her journey; but as they had a carriage to themselves, a few fond words or looks from him, she thought, would have beguiled it far better, and made the hours fly. Only once she ventured to allude to his evident depression.

“Are you not well, dear Rex? have you a headache?”

“Eh! what?” he said, rousing himself from a chain of painful thought.

She repeated the question.

“Oh, yes, thanks; I’m quite well,” he answered. “Give me one of your papers, Isobel, and I’ll try and amuse myself.”

And then he read until they had almost arrived at Folkestone.

Once there, the bustle of seeing after luggage and reaching the hotel where apartments had

been secured for them, occupied a good deal of time and attention. Isobel was fain to believe that that was what detained her husband for so long after she had laid aside her bonnet and shawl and seated herself in the handsome sitting-room which had been reserved for their use.

When he did make his appearance, it was dinner-time; and of course at that meal, and before the servants, nothing but commonplaces could pass between them. But even that came to an end at last, and the wine and dessert were left on the table, and coffee was served, and then they were alone.

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Rex, looking at his watch, “do you know what time it is, Isobel? it’s past ten; our train must have been deuced late.”

“I don’t think we sat down to dinner till past eight, dear Rex,” she said, as she rose from her seat and came near to him.

Ostensibly to look at the watch he held in his hand—in reality to see one loving look upturned to meet hers—to hear one word of affection. Oh, Rex, are they so scarce that you cannot spare a few to your one-day-old wife? Not scarce, but scared, frightened and driven away

into a wilderness of regret for an unworthy object, from which her sweet voice and sweeter love shall lure them back again before her holy work is accomplished.

But it was not to be to-night.

As she came up to him, and rather leaned upon his shoulder, he rose as if her touch was almost unpleasant to him, and rung the bell.

“ You must be very tired, Isobel,” he said, “ after such a journey, and you have another before you to-morrow ; you had better go to bed.” And then, as the bell was answered, he asked if the lady’s bed-room was ready for her reception, and if not, ordered it to be made so.

“ I should so much rather sit up with you a little longer, Rex,” said Isobel, as the man left the room again.

“ You had better not,” he answered, shortly. “ You have gone through a great deal of fatigue to-day.” And then she took up a lighted taper to do as he wished. He walked with her along the passages and up the wide staircase, and left her at her own door with the same serious face. “ I suppose there are bells,” he said, peeping into the room. “ You must ring if everything is not as it should be, Isobel. Won’t you have

the chambermaid to help you?" (for she was travelling without a servant).

"No, thank you," replied poor Isobel, trying hard not to let her voice falter. "I don't want any aid, Rex."

When he had left her she sat down in a large arm-chair by the fireplace, and tried to guess what was the reason of her husband's depression of spirits.

"He seemed so happy yesterday," she thought, "happier than I have ever seen him. I wonder if he regrets having refused my offer then. Oh! it is not too late," she said to herself; "the deed can be altered a second time. I will tell him so when I see him."

She proceeded to undress, and to robe her slight figure in a dressing-gown of pale blue, thinking as she did so. Of a sudden a thought struck her: what if it should be regret, too late, for his marriage, that had made Rex so gloomy and reserved, and her so unhappy? for his manner had caused her great uneasiness throughout the day.

Her face grew quite pale under the pressure of the horrid thought, and her knees trembled. "Oh, no!" she said, "the idea is too dreadful to be entertained. Why should he wrong him-

self so? Did I not offer to release him, and he would not hear of it? Oh! God forgive me for such a thought.”

And as she spoke she threw herself on her knees before the arm-chair she had been sitting in, and poured out all her heart in prayer.

Rex, walking back to the sitting-room by himself, did not feel satisfied with his own conduct. He was aware that he had been out of humour all day, and absent and pre-occupied. He had intended going in for billiards for an hour or so, but somehow he didn’t like the idea of letting Isobel stay alone in her room, of absenting himself for so long, without saying a word to her first. With this intention, after a little while, he retraced his steps.

“She will not be undressed yet,” he thought. “I will tell her that I shall not be gone long, and then she will know the reason of my absence.”

When he reached the door he knocked, not a particularly gentle knock, but it remained unanswered. Rex was always rough and ready; so he opened the door without further ceremony, and shoved his chestnut head into the room.

She was not occupied unpacking, as he ex-

pected to find her ; she had not even fallen asleep from fatigue in the arm-chair, as he had imagined likely ; but she was on her knees, her head bent down upon her clasped hands, her long, dark hair, crimped from the plaits in which she wore it, streaming over her shoulders to the skirts of her dressing-gown, praying.

It was an unusual sight for him. Rex almost held his breath as he gazed at her, praying in all her holy, uncorrupted womanhood — praying with all the fervour of her loving, trustful heart — praying for *him*. He felt it, he knew it, without being told ; he needed not to hear the fervent words, to see the tearful eyes, to note the throbbing of her overladen heart ; without all this, he knew intuitively that Isobel's prayer was for him, who had made her marriage day a long day of doubts and uneasy fears. At first he was about to go forward and wait till she arose ; but suddenly something struck him — a great sense of her purity, her worth, her love of God, and then of his own life so full of stains, his worthlessness, his irreligion. A wide gulf yawned between them ; her prayer seemed to divide and separate them as they had never been divided and separated before ; and with a more

conscious sense of pain at his own faults and follies than he had ever perceived in his life, Rex Reverdon shut the bedroom door with a hasty slam, and walked rapidly away down the staircase to the bar of the hotel. She had heard his entrance, she had even heard his previous tap; but much as she longed to answer him, she had not thought it right to disturb her devotions. Even through them she knew that he had stood and looked at her, and yet strove against the impulse to rise and speak to him; but when the door was slammed, and his hasty footsteps were heard in retreat, she could pray no longer. She could only think of him, and she was afraid he was angry. The night was oppressively hot, and she had previously opened the bedroom window which looked upon the courtyard of the hotel. As she stood, her hand upon her heart, almost expecting him to return and reopen that slammed door, she heard his voice in the courtyard beneath.

“Here, landlord,” it said, “where’s your billiard table? Any good players about here?”

Of course the landlord affirmed that Folkestone was peopled with good strokes, and the room was lighted, and the markers at hand, and would

the gentleman walk that way. Which the gentleman, after another short colloquy, apparently did, ordering brandy-and-water to be sent after him in unlimited quantities.

She stood behind her white blind listening to every word they uttered, her heart full of an undefined fear—of a horrible, sickly dread, which would creep upwards, do what she would to keep it down. And then when the sound of her husband's voice and step had died away amidst the sea of sounds with which the busy place rang, she sat herself down again in the arm-chair, her clasped hands supporting her chin, whilst she pondered upon the day that was past. And there she sat, sometimes dozing off in an uneasy slumber, and then waking with a nervous start to find she was alone, until the night was far spent, and the grey streaks of light which shot across the horizon proclaimed that dawn was near.

CHAPTER V.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

LUCY HALKETT had not been looking well of late. She was pale and listless, and not half so high-spirited as usual, and if it had not been that her appetite was still good, (for what girl of sixteen could live without an appetite?) her grandmother and nurse would have been seriously alarmed about the change. As it was the two fond old women had many a conjecture together, after Lucy was in bed and asleep, as to the reason that their darling's looks and conversation were less lively than they had been. The old nurse was a privileged talker on anything that concerned Lucy, for she had had the charge of her ever since she was a baby, and brought her up by hand ; and so Mrs. Halkett naturally turned to consult her first in any matter of difficulty respecting the girl. On the subject in question. nurse had a great deal to say :

"I'm sure, ma'am," she observed, "I've seen the change in the dear lamb as clear as clear can be, and many's the night I've lay awake and thought over the meaning of it, till my head's been quite muddled with thinking. It's my belief she's kept too close to her books."

"I think it must be the heat, nurse," rejoined old Mrs. Halkett, "she's growing so fast, too, and girls are so apt to lose their health when that is the case. Don't you think it must be the heat, nurse?"

"No, I don't, ma'am, not if you ask me the question ; I don't believe it is the heat, nor yet her growth, though she is uncommon tall for her age," and the old woman said the last words with as much pride as if she had built Lucy up herself, inch by inch.

"What do you think it is then, nurse?" inquired her mistress next.

"Well, ma'am, I may have my ideas and I may not ; it's neither here nor there, but I do think as it would do the dear child good to go about a little more, and see the world. Lor, ma'am, this is no house for a girl like that, no one but you and I to speak to all day. Bless my heart, how spirity the dear lamb used to

be, and now you may listen all day and you'll never hear her whistle, and as for the balustrades—there, I don't believe that child's been down the balustrades for the last fortnight. I'd give anything to see her take a good ride down 'em now.”

And poor old nurse grew quite pathetic as she mentioned Lucy's abandonment of her favourite exercise, and screwed the corner of her starched apron into her eye, which must have been a very painful proceeding.

“She has Master Henry sometimes to speak to, nurse.”

The nurse became indignant.

“Lor! Master 'Enry, he don't do her a bit of good, I can tell you. It's my belief she wants a few holidays. Why don't you let *me* take her up to London, ma'am, and show her the British Museum, and Madame Twosword's, or some of them lively sights. They'd brighten up the child, sure enough.”

But Mrs. Halkett, with all her faith in nurse's love for her young charge, drawing a mental picture of Lucy, being dragged over crossings, and in and out of omnibuses, by the old woman, who always became as frightened as a child her-

self directly she set her foot in London, did not think that it was a prospect calculated to minister to the girl's diseased mind.

"It cannot be that she is kept too close to her studies, nurse," she said, without noticing the old woman's proposal, "because she has done nothing for the last month, being holidays, and so I really think it must be her bodily health. I shall have Dr. Bustle in to see her to-morrow, and ask him to give her a tonic, or something strengthening, and I will get Mr. Henry to take her out for a holiday, now and then, and I dare say she will be better soon."

"Lor, ma'am, don't you go for to do that," exclaimed the nurse, her fears aroused by the latter idea; "Miss Lucy will be ever so much better in the country than rantering about London, and tiring herself to death."

"Why, nurse, I thought you wanted to take her there yourself just now," said Mrs. Halkett, in surprise.

"Ah! well—yes," answered the old woman; "it's different you see, ma'am, *my* taking her. I shouldn't hurry the child; not let her get fumed and fussed, as a gentleman's likely to. However, ma'am, you know best."

Mrs. Halkett did think she knew best in this instance, and said so :

“ Mr. Henry is her cousin, you must remember, nurse, and it is not as if he was a young boy of her own age, he is so much older than she is.”

“ I know that,” said the nurse; and then added to herself, “ Yes, older, so he is, and so’s another gentleman as isn’t fit to be mentioned, but I’ve never heard as he was any the better for it.” She had her own suspicions as to the reason of the change in Lucy, and very correct suspicions they were, only she dared not communicate them to her mistress. The consequence of which was that Mrs. Halkett took the first opportunity of consulting her grandson on the subject. Mr. Henry Halkett had been a great many times down at Ealing during the past month. He had appeared to grow suddenly very much attached to his grandmother, and very solicitous about her health—so solicitous indeed that it seemed impossible he could exist without making a couple of journeys a week down to Ealing to make his tender inquiries after it. And he never came without taking his young cousin out for long rambles in the surrounding country—

rambles from which she returned flushed and glowing—but which invariably left her still more languid and indisposed for exertion than before.

I think it was the very day after her conversation with the nurse, that Mrs. Halkett told her grandson, on his appearance, that she wished to speak to him for a few minutes alone. Mr. Halkett felt at first rather alarmed, and thought he was about to be questioned about something or other, that Lucy had let out, but his fears were soon set at rest, although the words with which his grandmother commenced sounded ominously.

“ My dear Henry, I want to speak to you about Lucy, the dear child has not been looking well lately. Have you observed it ? ”

No ! well—Mr. Halkett could not say he had observed it. He had always considered Lucy an uncommonly fine girl of her age.

“ Ah ! you mean she is tall, my dear ; but height is not strength, remember. She has looked very pale lately, and has lost her spirits. I think it is the heat, but nurse’s opinion is that the child is too much cooped up here with us two old women, and that she wants a little

amusement; but how am I to take her about, Henry?”

“Oh! I’ll take her about, if you like, grandmother, and show her a little life.”

“Now that’s a good kind boy,” said the old lady, laying her hand on her grandson’s knee; “it’s just what I wanted to ask you, Henry, but didn’t like to do. I really call it very good of you to offer to encumber yourself with a child like that, for I know it is not a task young men often like.”

“Oh! Lucy and I are capital friends, you know, grandmother, and I daresay it *is* rather dull sometimes for the poor chick down here. I’ll take her up to town for a day, if you like, and run over to Wimbledon and introduce her to the Huntleys. They’ll be nice people for Lucy to know, for she sees scarcely any gentle-people down at Ealing.”

“I should like her to know Lady Charlotte’s family very much,” answered his grandmother.

She knew them herself, although, from her age and infirmities, she never visited anywhere now. I mentioned before that Henry Halkett was known to the Littletin family, and approved of by them. And what her aristocratic progenitors

approved of, Lady Charlotte always patronised, consequently Mr. Halkett was as intimate at "The Oaks" as any one ever became.

"I'll take Lucy there with pleasure," he said, "and then I'll show the child some exhibitions afterwards. You mustn't mind my bringing her back by a late train, grandmother, the best things are always in the evening."

"But you mustn't take her to a play, Henry," said his grandmother, hastily.

She was a dear good old soul who had never been to a play in her life, and considered them perfect sinks of iniquity, pitch which you could not touch without being defiled. If Lucy went to a play, Lucy could never appear the same innocent creature to her grandmother again that she did now. The girl knew this well, she was used to hear long tirades against the stage and every one on it from Mrs. Halkett, which had been the means of raising an insatiable curiosity in her breast to witness a dramatic performance. She entered the room at this juncture, and was about to retreat again, but her grandmother called her back. "Lucy dear, what do you think cousin Henry says, that he will be kind

enough to take you out for a holiday some day, and show you some of the wonders of London. How shall you enjoy that ?”

The colour came rushing into the girl’s face at the news, and then retreated suddenly, making her look almost blue-white by the contrast.

“ There, that’s how she goes off,” exclaimed Mrs. Halkett, anxiously ; “ I sometimes quite think she is going to faint. You’ll be sure and not tire her, Henry, for she’s anything but strong, and don’t let her walk more than is necessary, will you ?”

“ She shan’t walk at all,” answered Halkett, as the girl sat down by her grandmother and leant her head against the old lady’s shoulder ; “ I’ll take the greatest care of her.”

“ And you promise me about the play, Henry ?” said Mrs. Halkett.

“ Oh ! yes, of course,” he replied.

“ What’s that ?” asked Lucy, raising her head a little.

“ Henry is going to take you to some place of amusement, dear child, but I have made him promise it shall not be a theatre. You know the horror I have of anything dramatic.”

“ Is it to be ‘ never,’ grandmamma ?” said the girl ; “ must I never see a play ?”

"Not with my consent, Lucy, and you wouldn't enjoy it without, dear."

"Oh, no!" she answered, and laid her head down again.

"When is it to be?" demanded Halkett.

"Whenever you are at leisure, my dear," answered his grandmother. "I suppose your time is very much taken up."

"Well it is rather," he answered; "but let me see—to-day's Wednesday, will Friday do? I will keep Friday open for Lucy, and sight-seeing, if that will suit all parties."

"Lucy has not many engagements," said Mrs. Halkett, smiling, "and I think I can guess whether it will suit her or no. Eh, Lucy?"

"Thank you, Henry."

The girl said no more, and then the arrangements were made for meeting, going, and coming home again, and it was decided that her cousin should fetch her early in the morning, and bring her back by the 10.10 train at night. Because the Polytechnic, or Madame Tussaud's, or the entertainments at the Egyptian Hall, never looked so well by the afternoon light as they did in the evenings.

And so Mrs. Halkett, after a little demur, consented that her darling should remain away until the 10.10 train.

Lucy, in her delight, was not long in communicating the news of her projected holiday to her nurse, but that old personage did not appear so pleased as she usually was at anything which pleased her nurseling.

“Missus is a fool, and that’s what she is,” she muttered to herself when the girl had left her again; “she might as well shove that dear lamb into a lion’s mouth at once.” And her behaviour for the whole of the day towards Mr. Halkett was, to say the least of it, curt. Once she encountered him in the passage alone, and put herself on the defensive immediately.

“I hear, Mr. Henry,” she said, “as you’re to be trusted with my child on Friday, for to gallivant her about the streets of London, all day. Now I’ll tell you what, don’t you go a tiring of her, or first will be last, for such trips. And don’t you go a putting any nonsense in her head, for the talk of gentlemen isn’t always such as does good to a girl of sixteen.”

“Who said I was?” he rejoined; “I think you’re calling out before you’re hurt, nurse.”

"Ah! well," answered the woman, "there are some hurts, as no calling out afterwards will cure; however, you mind what I say. I know my child's constitution, and I think missus must be mad, to let her go a trapesing about the streets in that fashion, that's all;" and she began to mount the staircase, muttering to herself as she went.

"Old idiot!" said Henry Halkett to himself, as she disappeared. But he didn't like the woman's remark any the more that he professed to despise it. He knew that she saw through him.

On the day appointed, however, Lucy met him, as had been agreed upon, at the station, looking so innocent and pretty in her simple white tulle bonnet, with a few blue forget-me-nots set in the cap around her childish face, that if he was really the lion that nurse took him for, she was certainly too much of a lamb to be trusted to his tender mercies. Her delight throughout the whole excursion would have been very refreshing for any one to see, let alone a time-worn, world-hardened man like the one beside her. The day was all before them, and Lucy assured him that she had an unlimited

stock of strength ; so he took her first to the Polytechnic, where she took as much interest in the diving-bell, and galvanic shocks, the whispering gallery, and dissolving views, as a child of ten years would have done, and more, because she was intelligent enough to understand them. Dissolving views and diving-bells were not exactly to Henry Halkett's taste, but sitting in the darkened room, with Lucy's hand fast clinging to his own, and feeling it tremble as he whispered in her ear, was not unpleasant, and therefore he endured the first for the sake of the last. After they had done the Polytechnic, he took her to Verey's to dinner. Oh ! the delight of Lucy, at their having a little table all to themselves, in that charming back room, and she to be allowed to order the dinner herself, and choose whatever there was on the “ carte,” and then to have it served so quickly and cosily, and to finish up with champagne (which Henry *would* call for,) and having her pockets stuffed with all kinds of French bonbons. She would have liked to stay in that prince of pastry-cooks' shops all the afternoon ; she was quite sorry when her cousin said they must think of moving on.

“ I promised that old dragon, nurse, not to

tire you, Lucy," he said ; "and so, if you will wait here for five minutes, I will order a carriage, and we will drive down to Wimbledon and see Lady Charlotte Huntley."

As she sat upon the velvet-cushioned seat, awaiting his return, how her thoughts, poor child ! dwelt upon him : his kindness, his generosity ; what did they proceed from, if not from— She scarcely liked to *say* the word, yet, it seemed so daring—but she felt it ; and she believed what she felt.

He was really gone not much longer than the five minutes he had promised, and then they passed out, and left the smell of soups, and *entrées*, and oyster-patties behind them, and were rolling through Knightsbridge on their way to the open country. Oh ! that seductive drive ! that easy barouche ! with its soft cushions and deep seats, in which, when she lay back, Lucy was almost hid ! those quiet bits of country road and open heath, where Cousin Harry made the best of his time for stealing kisses ! that brilliant August sun, which forced them at last to have part of the hood put up, and left them as private as if they were alone at home ! And during that drive she asked him, in the fulness

of her girlish heart, if he really, really, *really* loved her? And he had answered “Yes!” a dozen times, and sealed his “Yes!” with fresh embraces.

A dangerous drive for poor little Lucy—a fatal drive, which she remembered often, afterwards, with tears.

Lady Charlotte Huntley was at home, and received the young cousin of Mr. Halkett with her usual stiffness, though she intended to be kind. But Lucy found her way into the garden, and, being introduced to Gabriel, made great friends with him, and enjoyed her visit. The sight of the afflicted boy, so much her own age, made a great impression on her, and she alluded to it, as they drove back to London, with much feeling.

“How dreadful it must be for poor Gabriel to lie there day after day, Harry!” she said. “I felt as if I was quite wicked to be so straight and tall beside him, and to feel so strong. Will he never get well again?”

“Never, I am afraid,” answered her cousin; “he has been so for years. But come, Lucy, I can’t have you brooding over Mr. Gabriel Huntley’s misfortunes to-day of all days. If

you don't look more cheerful I shall be jealous. I don't want you to be crooked and deformed, you know, and have a hump on your back. I like you better as you are."

She slid her hand into his for a reply, and that was all.

"I am going to take you to my chambers to tea," Henry Halkett said, presently. "I told my charwoman, Mrs. Jones, that I was going to bring a lady home to tea this evening; and you should have seen how she stared. We shall have all the best china out for the occasion—a cup without a saucer and two cracked mugs—you see if we don't."

She laughed heartily at this, and told him she was quite anxious to see his establishment. I think she really believed what he had said; and was quite surprised when, after ascending a rather tall flight of stairs, and passing several doors, numbered and named, with knockers and bells to them, he ushered her into his own apartments, and she found herself in a most comfortably and prettily furnished room, hung with pictures and strewn with ornaments, and only wanting to be purified from its smell of tobacco smoke, and cleared of a few French novels,

pipes, and cigar-cases, to render it fit for any lady's use.

As soon as the woman who attended on him understood that the young lady had arrived, she bustled up from some underground offices and took Lucy into the bed-room to take off her bonnet and shawl.

“ ‘Tain’t so tidy, mayhap, as it ought to be,” she said, as she moved about, altering the position of a pomatum pot there, and shoving some article of clothing out of sight; “but gentlemen is that careless of throwing about their things. I’m sure it would take the hands of two women to tidy up after them. I hope you’ll find all comfortable, miss, though it isn’t a place like for ladies to come to. There’s clean towels on the ’orse though; and Mr. Halkett, he tells me this morning to put a new piece of his scented soap out in the soap-dish, if so be you want to wash your hands.”

So, rattling on, the Abigail of the Temple Chambers helped Lucy off with her things, and gave her what was necessary to arrange her crushed hair afresh. And then the tea was ready, and she must go in to it.

“ You must make tea for me this evening,

Lucy," said Halkett, as she entered the sitting-room; "and then I shall fancy I have a little wife sitting opposite to me, and making me comfortable. When is the happy day to be, Lucy? When are we to be married? I can't live here much longer alone, you know. I shall never feel happy again—making tea for myself; this tastes so much sweeter than usual."

So he went on, joking with her; whilst she, foolish child, drank in every word he uttered as gospel, and laid it by to dream upon.

"Now what are we to see to-night?" said Halkett, as tea was ended; "which is it to be, Lucy? the Adelphi, Lyceum, or Haymarket?"

"Oh, Hal! those are theatres, ain't they?" she exclaimed.

"Well, yes, they are; something of the sort, at least; but we must go to one of them."

"Oh, no," she said, "we mustn't; you *promised* grandmamma, Harry, and I—I almost promised as well. She would be so very angry."

"No, I don't think she would," he answered. "She said I might take you to some evening entertainment; and there are none worth seeing except the theatres."

“ The Polytechnic, you said.”

“ Yes, but we saw the Polytechnic this morning, so we can’t go and see that again. It’s all grandmamma’s nonsense, Lucy, about theatres. There’s no more harm in them than in any other show. She’s never been to them herself, and so she’s no judge.”

“ But she has so often asked me not. Oh, no, Harry! I can’t go; she will be so angry with me when I tell her.”

“ Don’t tell her, my dear.”

“ It would be so wrong,” sighed Lucy.

“ Not at all; you needn’t tell a falsehood about it. If granny or nurse asks where you’ve been, say to some show; and if they ask where, say you don’t know. I won’t tell you the name of the theatre, and so that will be perfect truth.”

“ It seems so like a story,” urged Lucy, again.

“ Well, look here, Lucy,’ said Halkett, presently; “ if you’re really determined not to go, I think I must take you home earlier, because I’m sorry, but I’ve got an engagement at one of the theatres to-night (only a little business with a gentleman there). I forgot it when I fixed Friday for our holiday, but I can’t put it

off. Shall I take you to Ealing by the 8-train instead?"

Poor little Lucy! it was very hard upon her. This glorious holiday, the evening part of which she had anticipated above all the rest, to be brought to a close so suddenly. And she had brought a blue ribbon with her to tie up her hair with, and a pair of white gloves, in case she was taken to any entertainments at which she must take off her bonnet. The tears came into her eyes, and she looked very downcast.

"If you think best, Harry," she said.

"But I don't think best, Butterfly; I think it would be the worst thing possible for me. I should be miserably disappointed myself. I want you to stay with me, darling, and enjoy yourself. Look here, Lucy, it isn't exactly a theatre after all; it's more a place of entertainment. Can't you trust me, and say nothing about it?"

"But I always tell Gran everything."

"Then you love Gran better than me, I suppose."

"Oh, no, Harry, you know I don't."

She laid her little trusting hand upon his as she spoke, and looked in his face with her

innocent eyes. How could he have the heart to lead her wrong ?

“ Come,” he said, “ you’ll just be naughty for to-night for the sake of your old Hal, won’t you, Lucy? and it shall be the last time. But really I must keep my appointment, and if you oblige me to take you home, you’ll make me very savage. You needn’t look at the stage if you don’t like, only come and sit in the box till I have spoken with my friend.”

But when she had allowed herself to be persuaded to go to the theatre with him, what girl of sixteen, never having seen a play before, could be expected not to direct her attention to the stage and what was going on? He didn’t expect it. He knew when he said so that she would never take his advice. When he had put her into the cab, he gave the directions to drive to the Prince’s Theatre to the cabman in so low a tone that she did not hear it. So far, he kept his promise to her. He dwelt largely on this ignorance of hers as an argument that she would not be deceiving her grandmother in saying that she didn’t know the nature of the show she had been taken to. But Lucy had been too well brought up to be satisfied with

such arguments. She only shook her head, and felt miserable. She was miserable, poor little girl, from the time she entered the theatre, and twice as much so when she came out. The box they occupied was on the stage, and commanded an occasional view of what went on behind the scenes. Lucy was at first almost as much amused to watch this as the play. It was wonderful to her and very new to see how ready the scene-shifters were to change the scenes ; how quickly woods were turned into drawing-rooms, and brightest sunshine into darkest night. The first piece played, which was half finished when they arrived, was a long and rather dull melodrama ; but then came a “ballet divertissement,” which was succeeded by a farce. Very soon after the latter commenced Lucy observed that her cousin seemed restless. The piece had opened with the appearance of a very pretty young lady, who was dressed as servant-maid, and had a great deal to say all by herself. Lucy thought she was very pretty indeed, with her beautiful pink cheeks and her hair in golden curls round her head : but she thought that the young lady didn’t seem at all shy, and she wondered that she liked to wear such very short petticoats,

and wanted to know why she was always obliged to look into the stage boxes every time she said anything, and why her eyes rolled all over the theatre so much instead of looking at what she was talking about. She wondered at all this to herself, because she didn't like to ask her cousin, he appeared so fidgety, and as if he was afraid she was going to question him. Presently some funny men came on the stage, with plaid trousers and coats and very big neckties, and then the young lady walked off again. Then Henry Halkett said to Lucy—

“Butterfly, it's nearly half-past nine, so I'll go and get my little business over, and then we must be gone. It wouldn't do to miss the train.”

And Lucy had said, “Oh, dear, no; pray don't let us, Hal,” and quite trembled at the bare idea. Henry Halkett, sauntering through the passages, and thence, behind the scenes, ran against the very young lady in short petticoats who had astonished poor Lucy.

“Holloa, Lizzie!” he said, “I was coming after you.”

“I thought so,” she answered. “I saw you in the box. Who's the child?”

"Only a little cousin. You're getting on first-rate, Lizzie."

She had been on the boards about a month, taking very inferior parts, but paying well because of her face and figure, which looked far better than usual, with the advantages of paint and powder. But she was changed in manner, and greatly for the worse. What before had been a look of cunning slyness in her, had deteriorated to a horrid leer, and her boldness had become almost insolence to those around her, in accordance (as she imagined) with the etiquette of the stage. In effect the boards, short a time as she had graced them, had certainly not improved Miss Elizabeth Ashton. She acknowledged Halkett's last compliment with a coarse "I should think I was," and then he said—

"Have you heard from our friend abroad yet, Liz?"

"What, R. R.?" she inquired.

"The same. You wrote to him, didn't you?"

"Yes, twice. No, I've never heard a word; he's either a fool, or he's mad. I don't think I shall have anything more to say to him. Holloa, child!" she said, turning round to a man who

nodded to her in passing ; “ how wags the world with you ? ”

“ But look here, Lizzie,” remonstrated Halkett, “ you mustn’t be so foolish as to quarrel with your bread and butter. R. R. will be back by-and-by, and you mustn’t let the acquaintance drop. It’s easy to resist answering a letter, but the bodily presence is quite another thing.”

“ I know that,” she said, carelessly. “ I shan’t let him drop as long as he’s any good to me, you may trust me for that. Now I must go to the side ; it’s my turn on in a minute ! ”

He walked with her to the side scenes, never thinking that they were visible as they stood there to the occupant of the box he had quitted.

“ I cannot stay either,” he said, “ because I have to take that child back to Ealing ; but I shall be back soon after you’re out. Where are you bound to to-night ? ”

She mentioned some place of amusement to which she was going, and he promised to meet her there.

“ Be quiet,” she said sharply, as he commenced to speak again, and she leant her face forward to listen for her cue at the side scenes. “ I shall have to go directly.”

"So shall I," he answered.

They were alone, and as she pressed her head forward to listen, his followed it, and he kissed her.

"Don't be foolish," she said, and appeared upon the stage at the same moment, and he looked after her for a minute, and then walked quickly away to regain his box. But the first sight he saw on entering it astonished him. Lucy, in the furthest seat from the stage, her head in her hands, sobbing violently.

"Why, what is the matter, Butterfly?" he exclaimed; "ain't you well? I haven't been long, dear."

But all Lucy said was—

"Oh, take me home, Harry—take me home to grandmamma. Oh, how I wish I had never come here!"

He thought the tender conscience was already troubling her, and strove to comfort her with a kiss. But she thrust his lips away from hers, and kept on repeating—

"Oh! do take me home, Harry. Oh, I wish I'd never come. Let us go home at once."

Then he took umbrage at her girlish folly in his heart, but he did her bidding.

“ Come, Butterfly, then,” he said, “ dry your eyes, and we’ll get your bonnet, and go home. We shall only catch the train as it is.”

And so poor little Lucy’s holiday was ended, and she went home with a heart far more burdened than the one she had brought out with her for the day,

CHAPTER VI.

MR. AND MRS. REX REVERDON.

“HAVE you seen that paragraph, Isobel?” said Rex Reverdon, pushing the ‘Morning Post’ across the table to his wife, as they sat at breakfast together in their hotel at Paris.

She had not glanced at the newspaper yet, and said so. He indicated the paragraph he had alluded to with his finger, and she commenced to read it. It was as follows:—

“Gold in Australia.—The ‘Melbourne Mercury’ of the 25th of May has the following:—‘The largest nugget that our town has ever seen was exhibited in the Commercial Hall here some few days since, by its fortunate possessor. We are almost afraid we shall not gain credence, when we state that the weight of this “pledge of Crœsus” is said to be — oz., — carats. The ore is remarkably free from mixture, and of the

purest quality : the shape rather oblong and less irregular than nuggets usually are. The finder of this valuable specimen is, we understand, a Mr. Charles Fane.’ ’

How her colour came and went as she lighted upon the name.

“Rex,” she exclaimed, as she lifted her glowing face to his, “can it be possible ?”

“I don’t see why it shouldn’t be possible,” he answered ; “the name is not a common one.”

“But Charlie was in America when we heard of him last.”

“And that was——”

“Two years ago,” she said. “Oh ! Rex, if this should really be him, he may think of coming home now. Dear Charlie ! how happy I should be to see him again.”

“It appears to me,” said Rex, sticking one leg over the arm of his chair, and taking out his cigar-case, preparatory to smoking, “it appears to me, Isobel, that nothing is more likely than that a young scamp, as you describe your brother to be, should, finding trade fail in America, cut over to the gold fields ; and if he has done so it fully accounts for your not having heard from him, which otherwise would be unaccountable.

He'll turn up again, depend upon it, some day ; scamps always do."

" Oh ! but Charlie wasn't such a *dreadful* scamp as all that," pleaded his sister. " He was very wild, Rex ; but then, poor papa was too violent with him. I was not at home, you know ; but, from what Fanny tells me, I think no boy could have put up with such treatment quietly, and Charlie was always high-spirited."

" Is he older than you, Isobel ?"

" No, two years younger ; my poor mother died when he was born. Charlie was always the best-looking of us ; he is more like Fanny than myself : fair and blue-eyed ; but so active and merry. He often used to visit me, and my god-mother was almost as fond of him as she was of me. Rex, shall I write to Melbourne ? Do you think a letter addressed there would reach him ?"

" Well, that's a difficult question to answer, Isobel ; but if the Charles Fane mentioned here is really your brother he will probably have made a little stir in Melbourne, and been a little lionised in company with his nugget ; and if so, your letter might get forwarded, if he should have left. You can but try."

“Oh! I will write at once,” she said, “I will not lose a day.”

“There is no hurry,” replied her husband; “the mails don’t go to Australia every day, and you have enough to do. You have not forgotten that we go home to-morrow, have you?”

“No, dear Rex,” she answered, “and I am glad enough to go. There is no place like home; I feel quite anxious to be settled.”

“Well, I shan’t be sorry either, for I’m deucedly tired of this hole. Where’s my hat?”

She fetched him his hat and his gloves, and kissed him as she did so. He accepted her little service as if it was his right, and suffered the caress, even removing his cigar from his mouth to receive it, but that was all. Yet Isobel seemed to see nothing strange in his behaviour, for she stood and watched his departure down the broad, stone, uncarpeted staircase, with a face radiant with gratified affection and pride in his possession. They had been married now for two months, and during those twomonths sh had been very happy. The gloomy depression which her husband had maintained upon his wedding day had gradually worn off, and although he was not very lover-like in his behaviour towards her,

he permitted her to love him, and Isobel was of that large-hearted disposition that can almost make itself content with loving. Rex let her watch for him, and welcome him, and wait upon him, with as much enthusiastic ardour as she chose. He suffered her caresses ; if she laid her pretty head against his knee he would place his hand upon it ; if she asked him, woman-like, a dozen times a day, "Do you love me, Rex ?" he would answer, "Yes," and ask when she would be tired of asking. It never occurred to Isobel that her husband did not seek for these things of his own accord, that he did not weary her with questions in his turn, nor angle for caresses out of time and place. She was too happy, she thought herself too blest in being allowed to love him and have him for her own, to have the leisure to think of all this. She had no thought of jealousy, no fear of losing him, of another taking his heart away from her. Why should she, when he had given it to her as a free gift ?

As they strolled along the Boulevards together, or through the Tuileries gardens, and she heard in passing the bold, outspoken comments of the French women upon the beauty of the Englishman by her side, her heart would swell and thrill

with pleasure, that was almost pain in its magnitude, to think that what they spoke of was her own. Rex, who with all his education had never had a taste for languages, and was as rusty in his French as most men are after they have left off studying it for a twelvemonth, used often to ask his wife the meaning of the sentences which were audibly given for his edification, and of which perhaps only a chance word here and there was intelligible to him ; and Isobel would translate them in their most glowing meaning, without a fear of any effect they might have upon him, generally adding to their flattery by a good squeeze of the arm she held, as she finished up with :

“ And it’s all true, Rex, dear ; they *couldn’t* say too much about you to please me.”

And sometimes the same feeling had come over Rex Reverdon that had possessed him before his marriage, that he thought he really *could* love her, or *should* love her, after a while. But two letters had reached him during those two months—two indifferently spelt, indifferently written letters, but full of passionate words and unholy wishes and regrets : letters which he had had the moral courage not to answer, but which

had done their work nevertheless. We have all seen how a delicate little plant may be kept back by the cold, although it is not killed ; it flowers in due time, may be, but not so soon as it ought to have done : this is what those letters did, as the interview had done before, for Rex Reverdon's affection for his wife. Just as the tender flower of love was about to put forth its blossom beneath the warmth of her goodness—some remembrance of that woman's charms, or her professed attachment for himself, would come and chill it. But even the frost itself must give way, sooner or later, to the sun. When Rex Reverdon did, on occasions, permit his real admiration of the natural beauty of his wife's character to escape him, Isobel treasured up each word as if they were precious stones, and magnified them into expressions of the same adoring love for herself that she felt for him.

There were a great many balls, fancy and otherwise going on at Paris when they had first arrived there ; and Rex was very fond of dancing, having perfected himself in the art (as most young gentlemen about town do), under *professional* auspices. But Isobel didn't care about

balls, she had been unused to go to them for many years past, and had no inclination to renew her acquaintance with them, and she told her husband so frankly.

“ You don’t think balls wrong, do you, Isobel ? ” he had asked upon that occasion.

“ No, dear, certainly not, as a rule,” she answered ; “ I wouldn’t presume to say that anything was wrong that was not actually breaking one of the commandments. I think people in this world too often forget that they have been told not to judge one another. What is wrong for one person to do is often quite right for another.”

“ Well, I can’t say I understand that line of argument,” said her husband.

“ I mean, Rex,” said Isobel, rather timidly, for she was always afraid he might think she was assuming the teacher over him, “ that the mere fact of moving our feet in time to music cannot be wrong. If, therefore, there is any sin in the act it must arise from the feelings with which we do it. And in that fact, I think, lies the essence of all right and wrong. There is far worse sin in allowing our thoughts to wander in church, or at our prayers, than in fixing them

on what we are about at a ball or a theatre. But in this age men strain at gnats and swallow camels."

"I believe you there," he said, laughing.

"Clergymen preach against the stage and the opera, from every pulpit, and tell you the harm of it lies, not in witnessing the play or listening to the songs, but in adding our mite of encouragement to the demoralization which the stage, lyric or otherwise, is the means of spreading. Walk into a concert-room any day you like, and half the men you see there are clergy: it's their favourite haunt. There they are open-mouthed, clapping the very men and women they tell you to discourage. But then, of course, the stage is one thing, and the platform at Hanover Square Rooms is another; and Grisi is not Grisi off the boards of Her Majesty's. Bah! I've no patience with them sometimes."

"Go it, little woman!" said Rex, infinitely amused; but when she deprecated his laughter, he added—

"I was only making-believe to laugh, Isobel; you've more sense than I gave you credit for. But why then won't you go to balls?"

"I don't say I *won't* go, Rex, I only say I

would rather *not* go, if you don't mind my staying at home. I don't care much about dancing, and as things go in this world, I think it is best, for the sake of what I profess, to stay away. But that is all ; and rather than vex you, Rex, I would go every night. If I am to choose between the sin of dancing and the sin of making my husband angry with me, I choose the former, and let God be my judge.”

“ Isobel, you're the only really religious woman I ever came across in my life,” said Rex. “ No, I won't ask you to do anything you don't wish ; but you won't mind my going alone, will you ?”

“ Mind your going alone !” she echoed with the most genuine surprise ; “ my *dearest* Rex, how could I ? No, of course not ; ten thousand times, *no*. I shall love to think of your enjoying yourself, and to imagine how all the women are fighting for my handsome Rex. Let them have you all the evening, darling, to any hour, so you come home to me.”

And on such a conversation as this she would live for weeks, going over each word and look in her own mind, and feasting herself upon their memory. It was at such moments that Rex's

admiration for the purity of his wife's principles would almost take the place of affection. But alas ! *almost* cannot stand in the court of Love. It must be *quite* or *none*, and it was not yet "quite" with Rex Reverdon. Therefore Isobel had her moments of depression as well as her moments of beatific rapture. But on the whole she was happy. And the probability of ascertaining some news respecting her brother Charlie considerably added to the enjoyment of her feelings as the next day saw them on their journey homewards. Isobel was the "jolliest" woman possible to travel with : even Rex Reverdon had told her that in the first days of their married life. She was never sea-sick, nor faint, nor hysterical : she went about with very little luggage (for a lady), and she was never out of humour. If all the *calèches* were engaged, or the best hotel was full, or the train met with a stoppage, all her anxiety was lest Rex should be put out, or Rex inconvenienced by it in any way. If he was all right ; if those blue eyes remained unclouded, that auburn glory of a head had a shelter for the night, that impatient spirit could soothe its restlessness with a cigar, Isobel was quite happy. She would have stood

until she dropped ; she would have laid herself to sleep upon the floor, and done both with a smile, so long as her husband retained his equanimity. I know some prudish people will affirm that such love on my heroine's part was undignified, that even if she felt it to that degree, it was unwomanly to show it. But down to the ground, I say, with all such humbug. There can be nothing done by a woman to the man she loves—to the man who loves (or whom she thinks loves) her, that is undignified or unwomanly. I do not care if she chose to lay her head beneath her sovereign's foot ; if she humbled herself to kiss his feet, to kiss the ground he trod upon. I would still maintain that no act springing from love could lower her. The “unwomanly women” are those who try to change places with the men, to subvert God's ordering in their creation, to have the lordship over them. Oh, women ! if you only knew that you never look so “unwomanly” as then. Let the man who loves you place you on a pedestal, and lie down and grovel in the dust before you, if so be he will, but don't climb there of your own accord ; or, sure as fate, when his eye has become a little accustomed to

the elevation, he will dethrone you, if only to show his God-given power.

I had commenced this subject with a view of introducing Isobel to you on board the steam-packet which took her across to Folkestone; but I find I have been led into a reflection therefrom, for which perhaps I have to beg your pardon. As she sat upon the deck during their short passage across, which occupied part of the day and night, she was too happy at the peaceful prospect before her to sleep, although they had come through from Paris without stopping, and she was very tired. She could only sit and dream of her future, to which each wave that was cut by the steamer's paddles, and scattered in foam upon the sea, leaving a white line behind it to mark their track, was bearing her nearer and nearer. She looked forward to no disturbance in the life which she had just begun; it seemed to her as though the disturbance lay all behind in the death of Harold Gray and the Peyton *ménage*, and that the open sea was passed, and the port was at hand. So mortality is apt to settle for itself. The Reverdons slept one night at Folkestone, in their old quarters, and went on the next day to Wimbledon—a

villa there having been taken by them previous to their marriage, and furnished mostly by Rex himself, with his usual good taste. As they entered it on that soft August evening, and found (notice having been given of their arrival) everything ready for them in such comfortable style, and their modest establishment, which consisted of a footman, a lady's-maid, and two other female servants, all waiting in the pretty fresh hall to receive them, the villa looked to Isobel like some terrestrial paradise. It was really like coming “home,” too, for there was Mary, the housemaid from Torrington Square, installed in the same capacity here, ready to welcome “Miss Isobel” with her old familiar face. For when she had found that Miss Isobel would not listen to any of her entreaties for her to take her away when she was married, she had gone straight to Mrs. Peyton and given warning, and then applied afresh as a candidate for the vacant honour of becoming housemaid to the new villa at Wimbledon.

“And I'm sure, ma'am,” she said—as she usurped the lady's-maid's place for that evening, and bustled about Isobel's bedroom, unpacking her boxes for her—“I'm sure the peace and the

happiness of this place, after the noise and racket of those rampagious children, is past telling ; the last few days, as we've been setting it all to rights against master and you coming home, have seemed for all the world like heaven to me."

The villa was not far from "The Oaks," and after their dinner was over, Rex Reverdon gave his arm to his wife, and they walked across the common together to visit his mother. The evening was as balmy as August evenings usually are ; not the faintest breath of air stirred the folds of the light muslin dress which Isobel wore as they swept after her over the short grass. Little children flitted about the open space in white frocks and blue sashes far from the skirts of nurserymaids and the track of perambulators ; pony carriages and groups of equestrians passed rapidly one after another along the public road ; and over the wide common was spread the outpourings of two or three boys' schools, busily engaged at cricket, and girls with their balls and skipping-ropes. It was the picture of a happy English scene—a picture which, although so common, seems sometimes to speak to us more powerfully than words. It

did to Isobel to-night. She looked at the little children, the parties on horseback, the merry schoolboys, and then she said—

“ Oh, Rex, is there any place like England ? How happy and how innocent they all seem !”

And I think her reflection must be a very general one when Paris is exchanged for the English country in the height of an English summer.

The scene inside “The Oaks” was no less cheerful than the one outside. The late dinner was over there also, and the whole family was out in the garden behind the house : Mr. Huntley quietly enjoying his cigar, with his wine on a table beside him, and the newspaper in his hand ; Lady Charlotte, in a sun bonnet and gauntlet gloves, a basket over her arm, and a formidable pair of scissors in her hand, pruning and clipping the dead leaves and blossoms from her favourite roses ; Gabriel in his chair, a book of poetry upon his knees, whilst he lay backward, his eyes fixed upon the ever-changing shadows of the evening sky. And round about them five girls playing “I spy I” with a couple of nursemaids, and making a great deal of noise in the course of their game. As the Reverdons emerged from the glass doors which led from

the drawing-room to the terrace, a general cry of surprise was uttered, and each one prepared to meet them after their own fashion. Lady Charlotte touched Isobel's forehead with her thin lips.

"Well, my dear, I'm sure it's very good of you to walk over here so soon. Reginald, I don't think Paris has improved your looks. How long your hair is!"

Mr. Huntley jumped up from his seat, nearly upsetting his table as he did so, with a—

"How are you, Rex? My dear Mrs. Rex, I'm delighted to see you. We were not quite certain if you would arrive to-night or to-morrow morning. I'm delighted to see you both; sit down, Rex, do, and help yourself."

And Gabriel, opening his half-closed eyes with a start, came to a sudden consciousness of *who* was standing on the terrace before him, and growing crimson under that consciousness, and unable to speak, could only raise himself into a sitting posture, as he stretched out his feeble hands in welcome. Then there were five loud shouts of "Here's brother Rex—here's sister Isobel," and the tramp of ten sturdy feet upon the terrace, and ten arms divided between the

married pair, and the Rex Reverdons' first reception was over. Scarcely over, though. Rex shook off all the five little sisters at once to make way for a clasp of Gabriel's thin hand, and Isobel scarcely heard either Lady Charlotte's or Mr. Huntley's speeches as she darted to the side of the invalid chair, and returned the boy's warm kisses. Ah ! how frail and attenuated he looked as he lay there ; how sharp and pinched the features which lighted up with so much pleasure at seeing them again ; how great an alteration two short months seemed to have made in him !

“ Dear Gabriel,” said Isobel, “ have you been worse since we have been away ? ”

Lady Charlotte, who never could bear the slightest allusion to Gabriel's illness, answered for him, and rather sharply—

“ Worse ! Oh, dear, no ! What can you be thinking of, Isobel ! He's much better : he gets better every day now.”

“ I thought he looked thinner,” she answered, feeling she had made a mistake ; “ but perhaps it is my fancy.”

“ No, it isn't, Isobel,” said the boy ; “ I am much thinner and much weaker, only it's treason to say so in this house.”

"Well, then, we mustn't be treasonable any more, dear," answered Isobel, trying to smile, though she felt more inclined to cry.

"Brother Rex, what have you got for me?" was the exclamation which broke from five voices in succession, the only distinction being in time and tone.

"Why, what should I have for you, Ada," (or Mary, or Laura, as the case might be,) was his universal answer, "but a good whipping. Come here and I'll give it you."

And then there were heard loud shrieks in pretence of mortal fear, and a scamper and chase round the rhododendron bushes, and through the shrubbery, until a small prisoner was captured and well shaken, and promised lots of French bonbons, if they would ask mamma to let them come and see what was in brother Rex's boxes to-morrow.

Isobel had followed her husband to the end of the lawn, during one of his wild pursuits, and stood there awaiting him as he returned breathless, with Ada hanging over his shoulders like a sack of corn.

"I wish, Reginald, you wouldn't encourage the children to be so boisterous," said Lady

Charlotte, who was clipping roses near at hand. “ Ada, my dear, get down immediately, and go to nurse. Young ladies should be quiet, and not romp or make a noise.” And so little Ada, released, walked off, with a very downcast visage, to the guardianship of her nurse, with some doubts as to the certainty of those promised bonbons being hers on the morrow.

In the meanwhile Rex approached Isobel.

“ How fond you are of children, dear,” she said, as he stood by her—wiping the drops off his forehead.

“ Pretty well,” he answered. “ These are all very jolly little girls, and we have been used to romp together ever since they were in long-clothes. They’ll soon be past romping now though, I’m afraid.”

“ I have often thought,” she said, blushing a little as she spoke, “ when I have seen you playing about with these children, how very fond you would be of a child of your own, Rex.”

“ I assure you I shouldn’t,” he answered, quickly. “ I should hate to have a child of my own. It makes all the difference in the world, romping a little now and then ; but—” and then, as if struck with a sudden thought, he

added, hastily, "you're not going to tell me, Isobel—"

"Oh, no!" she said, colouring crimson, as she answered his thoughts, "I meant nothing of the sort. Don't alarm yourself, Rex."

"Thank God!" he ejaculated.

The expression seemed to wound her, for she turned away from him and walked slowly back to Gabriel's chair. As soon as Lady Charlotte perceived her action, she dropped her basket and pruning scissors, and came and took a seat near them. Gabriel had talked more about his new sister's return than had pleased her; she already began to feel symptoms arising of her old curse—jealousy, when she saw them together. Her presence tied Isobel's tongue in a measure, and the fear of offending her by what she said; but Gabriel had no such fear, and talked openly of whatever came into his mind. As Isobel came near to him on the present occasion he reached forth his hand, and taking hers within it, held it so.

"Dear Isobel," he said, "I am so happy to see you home again. I have thought so often of you since you have been gone, and of the promise you made me the first day I saw you here.

Do you remember it? That you would teach me what is the good of my life. I have so often pondered on your words since, and tried to guess for myself, but I can't make it out without your help. I have longed for you to come back again.”

“I am so glad we have come then, dear Gabriel,” was all she dared reply.

“You must set up an easel in my private room, Isobel, and then when you have the leisure to come over you shall paint whilst I will play to you, and when it is too dark to paint you shall come and sit, just so, with your hand in mine, and teach me; will you?”

“I will do anything, dear, that you wish, and your mamma thinks right for you,” answered Isobel, “but I mustn’t tire you.”

“Dear me!” exclaimed Lady Charlotte, testily, “you always speak, my dear, as if my son was a regular invalid—like a man in a consumption, or something of that sort. He has only outgrown his strength. Dr. Bowlderby assures me that rest is all that is needed, and he will be all the stronger, most likely, for it, by-and-by. I wish you wouldn’t talk as if he was regularly ill.”

"Only regularly 'breaking up,' Isobel," said the boy, slyly.

"Gabriel," exclaimed his mother, "I shall be very angry with you if I hear you say that again. You know how it annoys me."

"I know, mamma, that you can't bear to hear me call things by their right names. However, you'll acknowledge I'm right some day. Isobel is wiser than you; she sees it plainly enough."

"Hush, Gabriel!" said Isobel, for Lady Charlotte was getting angry, and the conversation was becoming painful to herself.

As they walked home again, she mentioned the subject to her husband.

"Don't you see a great change in Gabriel, Rex?"

"No. Do you?"

"I think he is wonderfully changed," she answered. "His face is so drawn and his eyes so unnaturally large to what they were. Oh, Rex, what a pity that your mother will shut her eyes to his illness. If he never recovers, what a blow it will be to her!"

"Isobel, you don't think old Gaby's dying?" Rex asked the question almost spasmodically,

as he stopped short in his walk, and confronted his wife.

“ I think he’s very ill ! ” she answered, sadly. But when she said “ I think,” his momentary conviction passed.

“ Oh, you’re mistaken,” he said. “ You women always make mountains out of molehills. Why, he’s been like that for years, and all the doctors say that he will get over it in time. It’s only a weak spine, Isobel ; you know it isn’t like a heart disease, or consumption, or anything that must kill in the end. Oh, Gaby will be strong again by-and-by, you’ll see.”

She didn’t think she ever would see, but she didn’t say so. She did not wish to make the first evening they spent together in the new house an unhappy one for Rex, so she appeared cheerful and lively for the rest of the time, and made him so, though her own spirits were only assumed to that end. For when she said her prayers that night, she added to them a new clause, to the effect that it might please God never to send her a child, since her husband had said that he should hate it.

CHAPTER VII.

GABRIEL.

MR. HENRY HALKETT was one of the earliest to call upon the newly-married couple at Wimbledon. From the first day that this man had been introduced to Isobel, she had taken a dislike to him; an intuitive dislike for which women, I think, are to be trusted more generally than men, for nature seems, in most instances, to have gifted them with an instinct that shall make up for the weaker powers of their minds. But, instinctively or not, she disliked him, although when she knew that he was such a particular friend of her husband's, she tried to persuade herself that it must be a foolish fancy, based upon a dislike to dark eyes, and hook noses, that made her imagine this chum of Rex's a man who was not to be trusted. Halkett, on the other hand, had always taken

pains to make himself particularly agreeable to Isobel, and did not neglect to do so on this occasion of paying her his first visit in her new home. She, therefore, tried to throw as much cordiality as she could into her voice and manner as she greeted him; particularly when she saw the *empressement* with which Rex rushed in on hearing of his friend's arrival, and held his outstretched hands.

“My dear Halkett, I am so glad to see you again. I should have looked you up this evening myself, if you had not made your appearance. We only crossed two days ago. How are you, old fellow,—tol-lol?”

“I'm right enough,” answered Halkett. “Huntley told me of your arrival yesterday, and I took the first opportunity of paying my respects to Mrs. Reverdon. I've missed you sadly, Rex.”

“So have I you,” returned the other, frankly, “but there's an end to that now, Halkett. I hope you'll make yourself at home here, whenever you feel inclined. I am sure Mrs. Reverdon will be delighted to see you at all times.”

At which Mrs. Reverdon, although the conventional untruth dropped rather lamely from

her honest lips, bowed in so graceful a manner, that the want of cordiality in her voice was not so readily perceived.

“I’m much obliged, I am sure,” returned Halkett, “but I hope on your part that you don’t intend to desert the ‘village’ altogether, Rex. You will keep your name on at the ‘Oxford and Cambridge’ and ‘Waterloo clubs,’ I suppose.”

“Oh! certainly,” rejoined Rex, “I had no intention of withdrawing it.”

“And where do you intend to have your own nest, in chambers or apartments? If I were you, I should try and get my old chambers at the ‘Waterloo.’”

Now Rex Reverdon had had no intention of keeping a “nest” for himself at all. His home was within an easy distance of town, and he was not disposed to commence again the careless life he had just quitted. But Halkett seemed so certain that he should, that it was with a degree of indecision that he answered his question.

“Well, to tell you the truth, Halkett, I have not even thought about it. I don’t think it will be necessary for me to have either.”

Henry Halkett burst out laughing.

“Why, my dear Reverdon, you surely don’t intend to make a custom of always traversing this road between Wimbledon and town, at any hour of the night, and any time of the year, in order to reach your bed? You’ll be tired of it very soon, if you do.”

“Well, when one comes to think of it, it does seem rather impracticable,” answered Rex, “but then I don’t expect I shall trouble town much, Halkett,—at all events, out of the season. There’s nothing to be done there, now.”

“That’s rather a bad look out for poor me,” said his friend, ruefully, “who so seldom get a holiday for myself and have been looking forward to your return, in the hope of enjoying your company occasionally. I was going to ask you to go back with me this afternoon, Rex, and take the sofa in my chambers, but I suppose it’s no use doing so.” And he looked inquiringly into Rex’s face as he spoke.

“Well, I really don’t know, whether I *could* this evening,” said Rex, dubiously, as he looked at his wife. “What are you going to do, Isobel?”

“Oh! don’t think of me, dear,” she answered quickly. “I can walk over to ‘The Oaks,’ and dine there if that is all.”

"Well, in that case, I think I really should like to run back with you, Halkett; but not to sleep, thank you; I can return by the last train."

"What! when the evening's just commencing? Oh! come, Rex, you mustn't do that. Mrs. Reverdon will absolve you before-hand, for once, I'm sure; she would be the last to wish to spoil your pleasure, wouldn't you, Mrs. Reverdon?"

She took no notice of his appeal, but turning her eyes towards her husband, spoke to him instead.

"Rex, you know all that, without any need of Mr. Halkett telling you! Don't let any thought of me stand in your way, dear; I shall be very happy, spending the evening with Gabriel."

She would not permit her eyes to meet Mr. Halkett's, for fear he might read there how much she resented the impertinence of his interference, but he would have cared little if he had done so. When Rex, consenting to the proposed plan, had left the room to make the few arrangements necessary for his passing the night away, the conversation of these two turned on very

ordinary topics, and did not again touch on the one which had been under discussion.

“Gabriel Huntley has been talking to me about a cousin of yours, Mr. Halkett, who you brought down to ‘The Oaks,’ a short time since. He seems to have been wonderfully taken with the young lady’s charms.”

“Ah! my cousin, Lucy Halkett, Mrs. Reverdon. Yes, she is a very nice little girl; I shall hope to introduce her to you some day, if you will allow me. She is just of that age when the acquaintance of a few accomplished ladies will be of the greatest service to her. Have I your permission to do so?”

“Certainly,” replied Isobel; “I am very fond of the company of young girls before they have had the freshness of their minds wiped off by contact with the world. Your cousin has not come out yet, I presume, Mr. Halkett?”

“Oh dear, no! She is but a school-girl; but a very charming school-girl, nevertheless. You will find Lucy fresh enough, Mrs. Reverdon, I can assure you, to suit any taste. My grandmother has kept her almost entirely in the nursery.”

(And here it may not be out of place for me

to mention that Henry Halkett did bring his young cousin again to Wimbledon, not very long after this period, and made her known to Isobel; and that she, taking a great fancy to the girl, asked her so often to go and see her, that Lucy had many summer holidays there during the next few months—days which, apparently spent only in pleasure, yet laid the foundation of a friendship between them which will be dissolved, I suppose, only with their lives.)

When Rex was ready to start, the friends took their departure together.

“I don’t half like going now, Isobel,” were her husband’s last words—words which, meaning little on his part, were sufficient to insure her a good night’s rest, as she fell to sleep repeating them to herself.

She was so glad to see him happy—so glad to think that his union with herself would not prove the breaking-up of his old friendships (since he enjoyed them), and his old pleasures—that no idea of its being hard that she was left alone for an afternoon and night to herself, crossed her mind. She never thought once that it was early days for him to leave her, or that he seemed very ready to go. The one idea that pervaded her

mind as she put on her things to walk across to “The Oaks” was, that her Rex was enjoying himself, and that was quite sufficient to make the day enjoyable to her also ; so that she sung whilst she dressed herself and walked across the short, springy turf of the common which lay between the houses, with as elastic a step as any girl of eighteen there. The sun was just sinking behind the clumps of poplar-trees which edged the common as she did so ; and the red glory he was shedding around in his last look, reflected upon every little flower beneath her feet, every leaf of the trees around her, and turning the large duck-pond in the centre into a pool of blood, made every common fowl thereon into a *rara avis*.

Past five, already ! Isobel had had no idea the afternoon was so far advanced as she made the discovery. She quickened her footsteps, for she was fearful of a cool reception from Lady Charlotte if she went in late for the dinner-hour.

She did not half like inviting herself to dinner there as it was, not having been received into the family by her mother-in-law with that cordiality which sets a new-comer at ease. “If she doesn’t propose it herself,” she

thought, as she neared the house, "I shall walk home again ; for I cannot be the first to do so. I don't think I shall ever be sufficiently intimate with her for that sort of thing, not if I liyed here for years. If I did not know she was Rex's mother, I should never have guessed it."

But Isobel's courage was not put to the test this afternoon, for when she arrived at "The Oaks" she was informed that Lady Charlotte and Mr. Huntley had driven out some miles to dinner. And the footman said it, holding the door in his hand, as if he expected the news would send her home again, like any ordinary visitor.

"But can't I see Master Gabriel ?" she inquired.

"Mr. Gabriel Huntley is within, Madam, I believe. If you will walk into the drawing-room I will inform him of your arrival."

"Is he in the garden ?" pertinaciously asked Isobel, quite ignoring the dignity which Plushes wanted to maintain between them. Plushes was taken aback by the direct question, but he was still true to himself, as he stammered—

"I believe so, Madam."

"Then I'll go to him," answered Isobel, passing through the flower-laden hall into the

drawing-room beyond, and from thence on to the terrace.

Plushes opened his eyes wide at this undignified proceeding—so unlike anything he ever saw on the part of his mistress, who could not even make an inquiry without the aid of a footman’s lips—and wondered why on earth he was paid thirty pounds a year only to answer the hall-door, if ladies preferred to announce themselves. However, as Isobel did not reappear, he thought it better, after a while, to reclose his particular property, and to take his noiseless way back again into the servants’ quarters. In the meanwhile she had found what she sought, lying in his usual position, dreaming and alone, in the summer air.

“Oh, Isobel!” he said, as he recognised her; “do you want mamma? for she’s out, I’m sorry to say, and so is father. They’ve gone to Croydon, to dine at the Durhams’, and won’t be back till midnight, probably.”

“But suppose I didn’t want mamma so much as you, Gabriel?” she answered. “I came over expressly to see you, dear; and am rather glad than otherwise to find you alone.”

“But where’s Rex?” said Gabriel.

Then Isobel told him where Rex was gone, and that the evening was theirs, to do as they willed with.

"Oh, that's delightful!" cried the boy. "But look here, Isobel, what will you do about dinner? because I've dined, and was going to have tea when the children do. I generally dine early when mamma goes out."

Isobel assured him that "tea" was all she wanted either; and then Gabriel summoned the aristocratic footman before alluded to, and ordered him to have a table placed on the terrace, and tea laid there, with a haughtiness which he had caught from his mother, and which contrasted strangely with the usual softness of his disposition.

"And look here," he said, with the decisive air of a master; "see that they send up some cold meat or other. Mrs. Reverdon has not dined; and let us have plenty of fruit; and look sharp about it, now," he added, with an emphasis, as if the man had already committed a fault.

Plushes appeared to be quite accustomed to the tone, however, and to see nothing unusual in it; for he merely said, "Certainly, Sir," and disappeared to put the commands into execution.

“ Why do you speak so sharply, dear Gabriel ?” said Isobel, when the man was gone.

“ Did I speak sharply ?” he inquired, in his turn surprised at her remark.

“ Very—I thought,” she answered ; “ and it is so unlike your usual manner of speaking, Gabriel.”

“ Ah ! you see it won’t do to talk to servants as you do to your equals ; they’d presume on it if you did. There’s nothing like keeping them in their places, mamma says.”

“ Yes, I think she is right there ; but is it only possible to keep them in their places by speaking to them as if they were dogs ? I should be sorry to think that.”

“ Like dogs ! Come, Isobel, that’s a little too severe ; isn’t it ?”

“ I didn’t mean to be severe, dear,” she answered ; “ but you certainly speak much more kindly to Beau than you did to the man-servant just now.” Beau, a beautiful tan-coloured setter, who was Gabriel’s constant companion, now put up his silky head for a caress, as he heard the mention of his name, and seemed to uphold Isobel in the justice of her remark.

“ Well, I suppose I do,” replied Gabriel ;

“but I cannot say I ever thought of it in that light before.”

The tea-table now made its appearance, carried by a couple of servants, and as they placed it close to Isobel, and completed the arrangement of its various dishes, she uttered, “Thank you.” Gabriel looked quickly up as she spoke, but he did not say anything. But when the same Plushes to whom he had given the orders, having poured out the tea, demanded respectfully, before leaving, “Anything more, Sir,” Gabriel found himself saying, “No, thank you,” before he was aware of it.

“I should think John must be quite taken aback by my politeness, Isobel,” he remarked, laughingly, when the servant had disappeared.

“It sounds much more gentlemanly, dear,” she answered quietly; “and what is of much greater consequence, it sounds much more Christian. Won’t you have some meat, too, Gabriel? I don’t like to eat alone.”

They talked on irrelevant subjects as they discussed their tea; but when it was cleared away, Gabriel sat for so long a time silent, and with his eyes fixed upon vacancy, that his sister-in-law had to ask him twice what he was think-

ing about before he answered her. Even when he roused himself to attend to what she said, he took no notice of her question, but asked another.

“I say, Isobel, are you a Christian? I mean what people call religious?”

“You mean, do I care about sacred things, Gabriel? Yes, I hope so.”

“Are you not sure?”

“Quite sure; but quite sure, also, that I ought to care about them more.”

“But how? you go to church, don’t you? and say your prayers, and all that; how could you care more?”

“But every one who calls himself a Christian does so much, Gabriel.”

“No, they don’t,” he rejoined. “I don’t, Isobel.”

“You don’t pray, Gabriel?” Isobel’s voice, as she asked the question, was full of concern.

“Don’t look so shocked, Isobel,” he said. “How should I? Mamma reads prayers, I believe, or the children’s governess does, in the morning; but I’m never down stairs, so how am I to hear them? Besides, I can’t kneel.”

“But, my dear child,” urged Isobel, and

motherly compassion shone through her eyes as she spoke, “it is not necessary to kneel in order to pray. Do you think that when God took away your power of kneeling that He did not intend you to pray doubly on that very account?”

“I know I ought to pray,” said Gabriel, his mournful eyes following the direction of his thoughts, fixed upon a portion of the sky where the setting sun had left a crimson streak, as promise of his return; “but I’ve left it off so long now that I’m afraid to think of it even; and as for the Bible, I never open it.”

“But in church,” said Isobel, forgetting.

“How can I go to church?” he rejoined hastily. “Do you think I am going to stick in the aisle all the service and be made a show of? No, thank you. I have quite enough of it, going out on week-days, and seeing everybody turn round to stare at my hump-back, without an extra treat on Sundays.”

His tone was so bitter, his look so full of sarcasm, that she felt for him more deeply than she had ever done before. “Oh, dear Gabriel,” she said, “don’t be so hard.”

“It’s enough to make a fellow hard,” he an-

swered. “ You would feel the same, Isobel, if you had laid here, day after day, whilst other people ran about.”

“ I hope not,” she said.

“ What would there be to prevent you ?” he demanded, almost fiercely. He did not seem like the boy Gabriel any more ; he spoke with the heat and rancour of a disappointed man.

“ The remembrance that it was God’s will,” she said, quietly.

“ His will to make my life a torture and a misery to me ; to shut me out from every enjoyment of life ; to cut me off prematurely from life itself ; because I’m dying, Isobel, and you know it.”

“ I do know it,” she answered ; “ and knowing it, Gabriel, it makes me wretched to hear you talk in this manner. Why not say rather that God’s mercy has been shown in keeping you from every temptation of life, and will be completed by making you an early inheritor of all the delights of heaven ?”

“ Only I shall never go there,” he replied.

“ Oh, Gabriel, don’t say that.”

“ If you were dying, Isobel, should you feel sure of going there ?”

"Quite sure, dear ; sure and certain as I am now that I speak to you."

"Why?"

Shall I tell you her answer? Cannot each one of you rather imagine it for yourselves? It has been often said, and with great reason, that religious discussions are out of place in a novel. I think myself that the great truths to which we must all cling or be lost are too sacred to be interlined with the light, though perhaps innocent, jests, the shown-up follies, and the portrayed passions which serve to make up a book of amusement. And yet to say that all writing, in which holy names and things cannot conveniently be introduced, is of necessity useless or hurtful, I consider equally wrong. The subjects which lie nearest our hearts are not those we make the topics of general conversation ; and there *are* names (even earthly names) which we should think it at some times almost profanation to mention. Of course there are many who will differ from me here. Some people I know consider it quite seasonable to read their Bible during their dinner hour, and alternately devour their spiritual and their bodily food ; but for my own part I should prefer a lighter book for

dividing into such infinitesimal portions, and the more important time to be given to the more important duty. And yet, though I should ever refrain (I trust wisely) from following the example of some writers of the present day who mix up God and mammon in such charming confusion in their books, that you are puzzled to guess, on closing the volume, to which side they wish you to believe that they themselves belong, I hope that the importance of that one great reality which of all things alone will endure when our miserable display of earthly passions shall have perished and passed away, will, although not dragged forcibly to the foreground, still run through every work that may issue from my hand, as gold thread woven into damask enhances the value of the manufacture, although it is by no means the principal agent employed in it. And therefore it is that though Isobel Reverdon gained through Gabriel’s “ why” the opportunity she was wishing for, to speak to him of Divine things, I prefer leaving you to imagine for yourselves the words in which she made them appeal to his heart. It was almost a new idea to the boy, and his was just the large, loving disposition and sensitive nature

which responds most easily to an appeal of the kind. His dark eyes moved restlessly from one object to another as her gentle voice spoke to him of a love, the infinity of which he had never before dreamed of, and he attempted in vain to clear away the mist which had arisen in them without attracting her notice. As he listened and understood, it seemed to him as if God had sent one of His angels to open his eyes, and give him comfort. It was what he had, unconsciously to himself, been longing for for months—some one to teach him, to clear up his doubts, to give him some hope for the future, to which he knew he was hastening. For what Isobel had said of him to her husband, and what Gabriel had said of himself to her, was eminently true;—he was dying. It was no use Dr. Bowlderby telling Lady Charlotte that there was certainly a slight improvement; it was no use saying that next spring they would try the German baths, and which would be sure to complete the cure. Dr. Bowlderby might be too stupid to see it, and Lady Charlotte too obstinate to see it; but the boy knew it for himself, and he was the truest prophet of them all. The many years of confinement to one position, and the quantities of

medicine he had been compelled to swallow, had added to the original injury, so enfeebled a naturally delicate constitution, that Gabriel Huntley's little remaining strength was slipping away from him month by month, and there was not much left to go.

“ Am I tiring you, Gabriel ?” asked the sweet voice of Isobel, as she paused after an hour or more of talking on her part.

“ Tiring me ?” he exclaimed ; “ you could never tire me, Isobel. I could listen to you for ever. You seem to be bringing back to me all that I ever learnt or heard of as a little child. I wonder now how I could have forgotten it for so long. If I had had some one to talk to me as you have to-night, I never should have forgotten. Oh, Isobel ! you have made me so happy and so unhappy.”

“ But I mustn't make you unhappy, dear Gabriel. The truths I have spoken of to you (since they are truths) are only calculated to make us happier.”

“ Yes, for such as you,” he answered ; “ but I have never given them a thought for years till this evening. I have laid here grumbling and discontented at my lot, my only object how to

make the days go faster, sometimes even longing for death to come quicker, so that I might quit myself of an existence which seemed no use to anybody. And now I shall only have a few months—a few weeks perhaps, who knows?—to make amends for years of ingratitude."

"Gabriel, if you had only one day it would be sufficient; and if you lived your life twice over again it would not be enough. You cannot make amends for yourself; but there is *One* ready to make amends for you, and if you only trust to Him to do it, He does not require time. But don't let us talk any more to-night. We shall have many more opportunities, I hope, of doing so, and for all you say to the contrary, I can see you are tired. Let me call John to wheel you in, Gabriel, and let us have some music."

He suffered her to do as she wished, and his chair was put close to the piano in his own sitting-room, without his having spoken another word. The summer evening was still light out of doors, but in the house the dusk had fallen, and particularly in Gabriel's room, which was small, and had only one window. He commenced to play, and Isobel placed herself upon the sofa as

she listened to the strains which followed the dictates of the sick boy's fancy. It was strange music for so young a person to choose. Mostly composed by himself, or played from uncertain recollection of what he had heard ; generally wild and melancholy in its lighter phases, and grandly solemn in its more serious moods ; part sounded like a prayer, part like a lament ; and as Isobel listened, she felt that the elements of religion must have been in the heart which could compose such cadences. She was not an artistic musician herself, although she could both sing and play a little ; but she could thoroughly enjoy and appreciate music in others, perhaps more so than those who are always weighing the amount of education and art in their friends' performances by the standard of their own. As she listened in that softly-falling twilight to the tones which proceeded from the touch of Gabriel's thin, white fingers, unaccountable tears found their way into her eyes—tears which refreshed rather than scorched her brain, which seemed to fall back upon her heart, and lose themselves there.

“Gabriel,” she said, as the music ceased, “is that all your own composition ? I think it is beautiful ; it is just the kind of music to which

I could listen for ever. I shall bring my drawing over here the first day Rex can spare me, and commence to take your portrait if you will let me. Then I will paint, and you shall play. Won't it be charming? I shall work twice as well as usual with such music to listen to."

"Do you really enjoy it?" he asked in return. "You are almost the first person who has said so. No one cares for it in this house except myself. I don't think one of the children have any taste for it."

"And not Rex?" inquired Isobel.

"No; haven't you found that out yet? Rex is the dearest—he *was* the dearest to me in the world; but he never cared about books, or poetry, or music, or any of my things."

"Why do you say '*was*?' " demanded his sister-in-law, hurt at the expression; "don't you love your brother as much as ever, Gabriel?"

"Yes; quite as much—twice as much since he brought you here. At first, Isobel, I thought I should be terribly jealous; but it all wore off directly I saw you. From the day I saw your dear kind face and eyes in the Park I have thought of you as if you were a friend, and since

your marriage I have been growing to love you every day ; but this evening—Isobel, you have seemed more like an angel from Heaven to me this evening than anything else. God bless you for it !”

He put his thin hands before his face, and commenced sobbing. She, moved by his emotion, left her sofa at once, and came to him, kneeling by his side.

“ Dear Gabriel, dearest Gabriel, try to control yourself for my sake ; it makes me so unhappy to see you so. I am so glad you love me, Gabriel ; so glad to have been any comfort to you ; but I have done nothing to deserve such words at your hands.”

“ Done nothing !” he exclaimed, uncovering his face, and looking into hers with his large dark eyes, the long eyelashes of which were still wet from his recent tears ; “ you’ve done nothing, Isobel ! Is it nothing to do for me, what no living creature, not even my mother, has ever taken the trouble to do before ? is it nothing, when you see a soul going to hell as fast as it can, to stretch forth your hand (your dear, tender hand,” he exclaimed, as he seized and kissed it) “ and try to save it ? Oh, Isobel ! you

are God-sent to us. Happy Rex, to have you for his own!"

"His and yours, too," she said softly; "his wife and your sister, dear Gabriel, am I not?"

"Yes, yes," he answered, with a firm pressure of her hand, "my *dear* sister. Isobel, you will pray for me, will you not? God must hear your prayers."

"Mine and yours, and all our prayers, Gabriel. He only lives to hear them. I have always prayed for you, ever since I knew you; but you will pray for yourself also, won't you, dear?"

He did not answer, and through the gloom of the fast approaching night, she could not see his face.

"You will pray for yourself, dearest Gabriel; tell me so, before I go. It is never too late to begin; never too late for God to hear."

Still silence—only a firmer pressure, a clinging, childlike pressure of the little hand he held in his.

"Gabriel, say you will, or I shall go home unhappy."

"Yes, I will, Isobel. I could not sleep without it, now."

The words were whispered, but she heard

them plain enough. Heard them, and felt a warm, grateful glow rush to her heart as she heard.

And then they sat silent in the darkening room, each occupied with their own thoughts, each feeling that a new blessing had been added that day to their gratitude-demanding store. When at last the manservant, coming in to ask if they wished for candles, roused them to a sense of the time, they found it was ten o'clock, and Isobel rose to go home. As Gabriel returned her farewell kiss, he whispered,

“Good-night, Dieu-donnée ; that is my name for you in future ; remember, my sister, Dieu-donnée.”

Dieu-donnée indeed ! There were others found to acknowledge that, besides Gabriel, before she had been given to them long.

CHAPTER VIII.

DISENCHANTED.

THE little “nest” for Rex Reverdon to go to roost in, whenever it should please such as Mr. Halkett to tempt him to linger about town, until it was too late to regain his lawful bed, was, after two or three mild attempts at remonstrance on his own part, finally taken for him, by his particular friend, somewhere within an easy distance of their favourite haunts. And being taken, it was, as you may suppose, made use of. The bed was oftener slept in than was absolutely necessary, and never slept in without a cheerful little supper having been partaken of, first, at Mr. Reverdon’s expense of course ; little suppers which occasionally swelled, quite by chance as it were, into big suppers ; and it was amazing to see how many “fellows” that tiny sitting-room could hold at a stretch, and how many empty

bottles the fellows left behind them, as mementos of their presence for the next morning's light. But these little suppers left other mementos behind them, besides empty bottles. Their giver too often woke on the following morning with a confused sense that something was wrong, and as he thoroughly roused himself, confusion would fly before clearness, and he knew the “something” was himself. To do Rex Reverdon justice, he hated that little “nest,” far more heartily than Isobel did. He hated the nest and the suppers, sometimes I think he almost hated the fellows who persuaded him to give them, and I am sure he always hated himself for being persuaded. But this was Rex Reverdon's great failing—the rock upon which so many male barges founder—the inability to say “no.” How many men go on, as he did, persistently doing wrong, blaming themselves all the while for doing it, and yet have not the moral courage to break through the habit and have done with it for ever. I think if Isobel had been a little less loving than she was, a little less sensitive about the difference in her husband's age and her own, (which always made her fearful of seeming to interfere with any of his pleasures,) she might at this juncture have done

Rex an immense deal of good. He wanted some one to do for him what he had not strength of mind to do for himself, some one to find fault with his conduct, to grumble at his being so constantly away, to give him a reason for staying at home, even though the reason made him angry—so inconsistent is our frail mortality ; but Isobel did nothing of the sort. She carried an old-fashioned idea in her mind that the husband is the head of the wife, and the best judge of his own actions. She knew that she had married a man who had been accustomed to a gay life, and she supposed it must be difficult to give up old habits all at once ; besides, even into her unsuspecting nature, there was beginning to creep a doubt, since their return to England, whether what had been told her before her marriage by Mr. Peyton, was altogether false or not ; whether her money had not had *something*, a very little perhaps, but still something, to do with Rex Reverdon marrying her. It was a bitter, bitter doubt for her ; it only came at times, when perhaps some inuendo of Lady Charlotte's called it forth ; her heart was too generous to harbour and brood over it, but when it came it entered into her soul. And it made her still more diffident of appearing

to claim greater attention on Rex's part than he chose to give her of his own free will; therefore it was that she forbore to question him concerning his frequent absences, or to express a wish that things were not so; and so gave him no opportunity of saying he would alter them for her sake. More than two months had passed since they had taken possession of their villa at Wimbledon, and it was now October, and the autumn already fast leaving them. The weather was often uncertain, but never so much so as to prevent Isobel paying her daily visit to Gabriel Huntley, whose rapidly declining health had made itself visible at last to every one but Lady Charlotte. She still maintained that it was merely the weakness of a lad growing, under such unfavourable circumstances, and that time would be his cure; in which, indeed, she was so far right, that time alone is needed to cure all our diseases. But these daily visits of Isobel's, still more, Gabriel's daily longing for the time for them to arrive, were thorns, as you may well suppose, in Lady Charlotte's side. The little politeness with which she had at first welcomed the “heiress” had all evaporated for “Reginald's wife,” and when Reginald's wife was found to be

necessary to Gabriel Huntley's happiness, far more necessary than even Reginald had been himself, then Lady Charlotte felt that politeness was no longer part of her duty to her. The pet name which her son had given to his sister-in-law was the first decisive blow her maternal jealousy received, and from the hour she heard it, she had commenced to hate Isobel as she hated Reginald, and took no pains to hide her antipathy.

"What is that you call her?" she had asked sharply, a few days after the interview I described to you in my last chapter, as Gabriel was murmuring "*Dieu-donnée*" a dozen times in his sister-in-law's ear.

Isobel would have evaded the question, for she knew of Lady Charlotte's jealous disposition, but Gabriel, who never feared his mother, spoke out—

"*'Dieu-donnée'*, mamma. Have you forgotten the meaning of that?"

Now to tell you the truth, Lady Charlotte was not quite sure of its meaning, for, notwithstanding all the blueness of the Littletin blood, the colour did not extend to their brains; and the Littletin coffers had been too empty to

permit of attempting to make up the deficiency of nature by “cramming.”

“I think it very absurd to call people out of their names,” she answered, evasively.

“Well! if it isn’t her name it ought to be,” rejoined Gabriel, “for it fits her exactly—‘*Dieu-donnée*,’ God-given, and that’s what she is to me.”

“Really, Gabriel, you talk the greatest nonsense I ever heard,” said his mother, angrily; “one would think you hadn’t a friend in the world.”

“No more I have,” answered the boy, “not one like this, mother; not one I’d give her up for—God bless her!”

“Oh Gabriel! you forget your mother,” said Isobel, hastily. Lady Charlotte, who had grown very red under his remark, now rose from her chair—

“I suppose I have to thank you,” she said, speaking to Isobel, “for this. Gabriel used not to insult me with impunity.”

Isobel was inexpressibly shocked. She ran after Lady Charlotte and caught her hand—

“Oh! pray, don’t say that, Lady Charlotte!” she exclaimed. “I am sure you cannot mean it.

I have said nothing out of the way to Gabriel. I suppose the boy has taken a fancy to me, and——”

“Pray don’t take the trouble to make excuses, Isobel. If it had been Reginald, I should not have been in the least surprised; but I thought better of Gabriel.”

“But you do not think it *my* fault?” Isobel still pleaded.

“Not your intentional fault, I suppose,” replied her mother-in-law, as she coldly disengaged her hand from Isobel’s grasp, “but a great deal of harm is done by indirect influence.”

And then she passed on, still uncompromising, and Isobel returned to Gabriel.

“Never mind, my *Dieu-donnée*,” he said, in answer to her distress, “it’s only one of mamma’s humours; she’ll come round by-and-by.”

“You mustn’t call me that any more, dear Gabriel.”

“Mustn’t! who says so?” he exclaimed. “I will call you so, Isobel, until I die, my *Dieu-donnée*—my own *Dieu-donnée*—my dear *Dieu-donnée*.”

And *Dieu-donnée* he had continued to call her from that day to this, but every time Lady Charlotte heard it she fixed a fresh arrow in her bow with which to revenge herself upon poor Isobel.

Lady Charlotte's evident antipathy was very hard to bear. Isobel's pride would never have permitted her to bear it if it had not been for Gabriel, who suffered so much from any defalcation on her part; but her arrows were harder still. Shafts, which came upon the wife's tender heart so suddenly—so unavoidably—and yet which, though shot at random, never failed to strike, and spread the poison they were laden with. Hints of Rex's infidelity; old stories of Rex's immorality; chance allusions to Rex's former extravagances, and need of money; stray remarks upon Rex's youth, and Rex's frequent absence; hints, stories, allusions, remarks, which dropped so inadvertently, as it were, from the cold, cruel, lips of Lady Charlotte, but every one of which she had prepared and seasoned beforehand for her victim, every one of which she *heard* strike home, in the quickened breathing, which she *saw* draw blood in the heightened colour, which she *knew* had

wounded mortally by the pallor, the depression, and the pre-occupation of thought, which invariably followed their discharge. And yet, the true wife—the brave woman—bore it all, and made no sign ; received the venomous weapons in her warm loving breast, and hid them away there without a word for *his* sake ; though every breath she drew, in her mother-in-law's presence, made the barb rankle deeper.

But between her own fears and doubts and Lady Charlotte's cruelty, the two last months had been less happy ones to Isobel ; and from his dissatisfaction at his own conduct, less happy ones to Rex also, than the two preceding ones had been.

Rex was in the habit of spending three nights out of the week in town ; in the habit of frequenting most of his bachelor haunts, and of keeping up many of his bachelor acquaintances, many which he had far better have dropped ; but he had never patronised the Prince's Theatre yet, and he had no intention of so doing. When he had first returned to England, he had inquired of Halkett if Miss Ashton was in want of money in consequence of the letters she had sent him, and Halkett had said “Yes.” Whereupon Rex

had given his friend some for her use, and told him at the same time to ask her not to write to him again, unless there was actual necessity for doing so.

“My dear fellow,” said Halkett, on the occasion, “are you turned such a coward that you’re afraid of a bit of paper?”

“I am not going to answer them,” replied Rex, curtly, “and therefore it’s no use her writing to me. It only keeps up the old feeling. She can let you know, Halkett, when she wants money; though I haven’t got so much to spare now as I had.”

“Are you not going to see her yourself?”

“Most decidedly not.” And Rex had kept to his decision. I do not know if Elizabeth Ashton made any attempts at this time to see him; perhaps she was still woman enough to feel piqued at his apparent indifference; perhaps she made sure it was only apparent, and that her best plan on the occasion was to let him alone. At all events, they had not met. Halkett’s influence not having proved strong enough to persuade Rex to seek her presence of his own accord; and Rex’s own heart not feeling strong enough to permit him to do so. He dreaded to meet her; he was

afraid of himself and of her ; afraid lest the old feelings, which he had not yet forgotten, should be roused again by the sight of her seductive charms : for Rex had not yet forgiven himself for the weakness he had been betrayed into at their last meeting,—he had not yet reconciled that act of disloyalty to Isobel with his own conscience,—and so far he was very wise and very right. But the best among us are not so always, and the evening arrived when Halkett was to have his way. There are some days when we seem weaker than others—less able to judge for ourselves—more prone to act against the dictates of our common sense, and such a day this proved for my hero. One reason was, that it had been unusually cold for October, and Rex had taken sundry “nips of brandy” during the afternoon to support his inner man, and they had taken some effect upon him. Pray don’t mistake my meaning, and imagine he was tipsy at six o’clock p.m. Brandy may “take effect” upon a man in various ways before it takes effect upon his head. It may make him feel more generous—more affectionate—or more cheerful than is his wont—or it may make him less than either of them in the same degree. It had the

effect of making Rex surer of his own strength of mind, and readier to believe that he was beyond the power of temptation. Therefore, as they were eating their dinner together at St. James's Hall, and Halkett proposed that they should look in at the Prince's Theatre that night, his remonstrance was not so decided as it had usually been.

“ You know I don't care about that theatre, Halkett. Why the devil can't you propose another ?”

“ Why not ? There's a capital piece on there now,” said Halkett, as if he had quite forgotten there was such a person as Elizabeth Ashton in the world ; and then, as if remembering himself, added, “ Oh ! I suppose it's that girl you're thinking of again. Good Heavens, Rex ! haven't you got over that affair yet ?”

The tone was so contemptuous that it nettled Rex.

“ It's because I *have* got over it, that I don't care to renew the illusion,” he answered, testily.

“ Rather queer idea that, isn't it ?” remarked Halkett. “ When a thing's over, it's over. What more harm can seeing that girl do you, than seeing any other girl ?”

"None that I know of," he said; "but I don't particularly care to see her."

"But you may care to see the piece. Mary Seeley's on at the Prince's now, and your favourite Lobson. Do come, Rex. I shall think your boasting of having got over your penchant for Lizzie Ashton is only boasting, if you don't."

"Hang Lizzie Ashton and you, too," exclaimed Rex, wrathfully, as he rose from the table, and paced up and down the dining-hall, to the astonishment of the other customers. "What do I care if I see that girl, or every girl in London? they're nothing to me."

"Well, come to the Prince's, then," urged Halkett.

"Of course I will. You don't suppose a *woman* (the last couple of syllables in a tone of the supremest contempt) would keep me from going to any place of amusement that I chose. You seem to imagine I am half a fool, Halkett."

"My dear fellow," answered the other, (too wise to remark that the change was in Rex, and not in himself,) "how can you talk such nonsense? I knew how you would go all along. We won't trouble ourselves about the melodrama; but just drop in for the farce. By-the-

by, there's a very fair ballet on between the pieces, and that little Gregson (whom you used to admire so much) dances in it.”

“Well, I don't mind sitting out the farce to please you,” said Rex; “but I've lost all my taste for theatres, Halkett, and I wouldn't give a glass of good port like this,” he added, (raising his wine-glass to his lips,) “for all the theatres in the world.”

“Nor all the women?” suggested Halkett.

“I've nothing to do with any women,” answered his friend, “but one.” And then Halkett knew that he had gone far enough. But when they arrived at the Prince's Theatre, Rex began to show the white feather.

“Don't let us have the stage-box,” he whispered to his friend as they reached the entrance; “get something a little further off. I dislike being before the gas.”

Halkett wondered how long Rex's eyes had been weak, but he forbore joking him.

“We will have the next to it, if we can,” he answered.

The “next to it” was disengaged, and they took up their station there.

“Come more to the front, Reverdon,” said

Halkett, as Rex ensconced himself in the back of the box, "you can see nothing there."

"Thank you, but I can see quite as much as I wish to," was the rejoinder; "I'm not a child, staring at my first play."

He continued to sit where he had first placed himself, and seemed to evince no interest whatever in what was going on before him. Presently Halkett rose:

"I'm going to take a walk round the house, Reverdon, won't you come?"

"I don't seem to care about it, thank you," said the other, "there's no one that I know present. I'll wait for you, Halkett; you'll find me here when you return."

But when Mr. Halkett had once taken his departure, no child staring at his first play could have watched the stage with greater eagerness than did Rex Reverdon. He pressed forward to the front, where he had not ventured to show himself before, (although the tones of a sharp inflexible voice had already startled him, as being so like, and yet so unlike, the one he remembered), and half, hidden by the short red curtain, he gazed again upon Pearl Ashton. Good Heavens! was that *her*? that painted, pow-

dered, be-frizzled head, the one that had laid so often on his shoulder? that exposed and padded figure, the same that he had so much admired? those eyes—Rex Reverdon couldn't look at the eyes, he shut his own, instead; he could not look at them, as they now were, and remember that he had once gazed into them with such rapture, and believed that they always looked as modestly as they seemed to do at him. To say that the first glance he caught of Elizabeth Ashton's face and figure on the stage was a shock to him, is not saying too much. He had to look two or three times before he could believe that it was her; and then he had to look *within*, two or three times, to make sure that he was himself; and then he gave a great sigh of relief, and it was over. Was *this* the woman he had fancied that he loved? This woman, who was showing such an unnecessary quantity of ankle, and rolling her eyes all over the theatre, from pit to gallery, from boxes to orchestra, without a pause? Was this Pearl Ashton? Pearl! Good Heavens! Did she look like a pearl at this present moment? did she look like anything but the very commonest of actresses and women? And he had been

dreading to meet her for the last two months, scrupulously avoiding her presence, even the sight of her, for fear she might regain her old influence over him. Influence! had she ever had any? Rex was almost ready to ask himself the question now, and I doubt if it had not commenced to dissolve the evening she pursued him to his Club Chambers, and been gradually melting away, unconsciously to himself, ever since. Well! it was gone now, at all events,—the last bit of this “bogy” of snow was resolved into water. Rex had grappled with his giant, and found it a shadow. He was free again. The first sight of his old folly had disenchanted him; he breathed better as he thought of it, he ejaculated a more earnest thanksgiving than had passed his lips for many a day. Careless now of what he did, or saw, he leaned far over the front of the box and mused, staring down into the sea of heads beneath him in the pit. His thoughts, as he did so, were still upon his great deliverance. He could scarcely believe yet that it was true, that what he felt was not a dream, and that he should wake in a few minutes to find he was again the slave of a haunting memory, which should weigh

him down in the midst of his greatest pleasures with a sense of care. His attitude, one of apparent dejection, was not unobserved by some one behind the scenes.

“Look at your victim, Lizzie,” said Halkett to Miss Ashton, who happened to be “off” just at that moment, “he’s going to commit suicide into the pit.”

“Do you really believe it’s all about me?” she asked.

“About you? I should think it was,” he answered. “You should have seen him, when I persuaded him to come here; he went on like a madman at the St. James’s. I believe you could do anything with him now.”

“Do you?” she said, “then I’ll try before the evening’s out. Hold my shawl, Harry, I’ll be ‘off’ again directly.”

“Off” or “on” signified little to the subject of her conversation, who never raised his eyes to look at her again, and only shuddered once or twice when her voice reached him. He was thinking of Isobel, as he sat there,—of his wife, who, now he was free to love, he felt he could begin to love. He thought so, but we all know that there is no such thing as a perceptible

beginning to Love. If his love for Isobel had not already begun, the thought would not have struck him. And, it is not saying much of him to say so ; for a man would have been less than a man who could have lived under the influence of such a woman's love for four months, and not have experienced some feeling of the kind, for her, in return.

He was roused from his reverie by the opening of the box door. Halkett had come back. That fact alone did not render it necessary for him to turn round his head. But another fact followed quickly upon it, which did compel him to do so. A hand was laid upon his shoulder ; a sharp, familiar voice said, “ Well, Mr. Reverdon, are you not going to notice me ? ” And then Rex stood up, blushing, from the very consciousness of his infidelity (for he was not yet too old, or too hardened, to blush at times), and was standing, face to face, with Elizabeth Ashton.

“ I hope you are quite well,” he said, as he shook hands with her.

How often partings in this world, which have been as bitter as the parting of these two (on his side, at least), on the night before his wedding,

are followed by meetings, the warmest salutation of which is, “ How do you do ?” or “ I hope I see you well,” or some such commonplace. Halkett had expected Rex to show great agitation at the sudden rencontre ; for Rex was of a very excitable, impulsive, temperament, as most auburn-headed men are, and made himself very ridiculous at times from the warmth of his feelings. Elizabeth Ashton, too, had expected something of the sort ; or, as she was a woman, and knew more about the language of the heart than Halkett, dead silence on the part of Rex would have conveyed as much meaning to her mind. But this cool shaking of hands, this deliberate “ I hope you are quite well,” looked very like a cure. A cure of how long standing she could not determine ; but her feminine instinct did not deceive her. The man who stood before her was not the man she had parted from : he was disenchanted—no longer in love ; though whether irrecoverably lost to her, time and her tactics alone would determine. At present, however, she considered it wisest to adopt his own manner.

“ Quite well, thank you. I am so glad you came to see me, at last. How do you like my part ?”

"Not very much, Lizzie," he answered ; "you know I never wished you to be an actress. You were born for something better than that."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"What would you have me do? I must live."

"And can you live by it?" he asked.

"Pretty well," she answered ; "and I am rising, you know. Jones thinks a great deal of me, I can assure you, and he has promised me a part in the new drama next month."

"I'm very glad of that," he said ; "we shall see you at the top of the tree, some day,—the tree that bears so many bouquets every night."

"Likely enough," she answered, in the same tone ; "but the curtain's falling. And now, where are you off to?"

"I'm bound for home," said Rex ; and at the word, he felt quite a glow about his heart.

"What! ain't you going to have supper in town?" exclaimed Miss Ashton, in a tone of disappointment. "What a sell! I made sure you would treat me to a supper, Rex—and so long since we met, too. I suppose I must go home to bread and cheese."

Now Mr. Reverdon and Mr. Halkett had

already ordered supper to be ready for them at the “nest,” and when the former said he was going home, he had made a mental reservation as to the time of his doing so. As Elizabeth Ashton spoke, he looked at Halkett, and Halkett looked at him, and she saw the mutual glance.

“I know you are going to have supper somewhere, all by yourselves, you greedy creatures,” she said. “Oh, Rex! *do* take me with you.”

Rex’s illusion was gone; but, after all, this was a woman; and there are very few requests that a man will refuse a woman when she takes to emphasising “*do*,” with her lips close together.

“If Halkett will take you home afterwards,” said Rex, “I shall be delighted, Lizzie.”

What did he care now if she came or didn’t come? He was no longer afraid of her or of himself. She was welcome to his supper; in fact, he felt so grateful to her for having disenchanted him, that he would have given her anything she asked for.

Halkett, of course, would be delighted to take her home, or be of use in any way possible: and so, her large cloak enveloping her

stage dress, she was conveyed to a cab by the two gentlemen, who jumped in after her, and gave the order for the address of Rex Reverdon's "*nest*."

CHAPTER IX.

A WALK HOME UNDER DISADVANTAGEOUS
CIRCUMSTANCES.

“ IT wasn’t my fault, my dear fellow,” said Halkett, anxious to excuse himself before the reproaches he expected from Rex burst upon him. “ She insisted upon my taking her round to your box, and when a woman begins to insist, what can one do ?”

They were standing together in Rex’s little sitting-room, waiting for the appearance of the supper, whilst Miss Ashton had been ushered into the adjoining bedroom, to arrange her hair and wash her hands. Rex was also arranging his hair in a primitive [fashion with his fingers, before the mirror over the mantel-piece, as Halkett spoke, and when he turned therefrom to answer his remark, his face, what with brandy and relief, was perfectly radiant.

"Don't say another word, Halkett; I am very glad she should have come. I told you before that I didn't care if I saw her, or didn't see her. She's a deuced fine girl, and she may have her supper here every night if she likes;" and he filled a tumbler half full of wine and drank it off as he spoke. "By Jove, I never thought little Lizzie would turn out half such an actress as that, Halkett. We must open some champagne to celebrate our reunion," and he rung the bell to order it as he spoke.

Halkett was surprised at his coolness, but attributed it to the liquor he had already imbibed, "notwithstanding which," he added to himself, "he's a pluckier fellow than I took him for, and coming out quite in a new character."

The supper, although originally intended for two, was more than sufficient for three, and had been ordered with the recklessness that land-ladies do order suppers (the remains of which are to be their perquisites) for careless young men of fortune; and the fair Miss Ashton seemed quite ready to do justice to all the best things upon the table. As Rex looked at her more fully, by the bright gas-light of his little room, noted the unpleasant expression in her

eyes—not new, indeed, but far more frequently displayed than heretofore—and heard the bold, familiar tones of her voice, he wondered still more to think he had fancied himself enchain'd so long by charms such as these. It was no longer Pearl Ashton who sat before him. The person he had imagined to be so, but who had never existed, except in his own imagination, had died when he first glanced upon the stage that evening. This was Miss Lizzie Ashton, of the Prince's Theatre, and about as much to him as any other “Miss” of any other theatre would have been.

His had been a lonely life and a lonely heart from his boyhood, although apparently surrounded by friends. He had craved for a companion, a friend of his own age, some one who should love him for himself, not for his money, and would have welcomed such, in whatever station of life he had found them. And he had imagined that he had done so when he lit upon Elizabeth Ashton. He thought she loved him as a brother, and he thought he loved her as a sister, and I think that if the proposal to marry Miss Fane had not been made to him that he never would have thought otherwise. The

inherent obstinacy of his nature made him imagine the contrary, directly it became an unpleasant obstacle to what he felt he was driven to do in the other direction ; but I think the very fact of his mentioning it to her drove some of it away, as speaking of a horrid dream which has haunted us for nights past, to another person, will often dispel even the memory of it at once. The friend, the companion, he had sought for, who should be more to him than Halkett or any man could be, he had found in Isobel Fane ; and as the false image he had set up and worshipped in that capacity fell to the dust and crumbled before him, he knew for himself that he had done so. He knew as he looked at Lizzie Ashton sitting in her paint and short petticoats beside him, that somebody or something had lifted that burden off his heart, and that he was a free man again.

“ Notwithstanding my rude speech in the theatre just now,” he said, as he helped his fair guest to chicken-salad and champagne, “ I think your acting is wonderful, Lizzie, considering how short a time you have been on the stage—only three months, isn’t it ? ”

“ Four,” she answered, with her mouth full.

“I went on two days after my father was buried, about a week after I saw you last, Rex,” she added, looking up at him rather slyly.

He coloured slightly, but showed no further signs of recollection. Then he said—

“I suppose you don’t live at Islington now?”

“No,” she answered; “I lodge close to the Prince’s; it saves so many cabs. You must come and see me, Rex. Mr. Halkett knows my address.”

“Of course I will,” rather shouted than said Rex, in the exuberance of his spirits, although he had no intention of doing anything of the kind. “Have some more champagne, Lizzie,” and as he filled her glass, he filled his own tumbler.

“You’ve been travelling a good deal since I saw you last,” she suggested presently.

“Oh, yes, a deuce of a lot—half over the world; but I’m very glad to be home again, I can tell you.”

“Where do you live?”

The champagne was fast getting into Rex Reverdon’s head, but it had not yet mounted quite so high as to permit him to give Lizzie Ashton the address of his wife and himself; so

he winked at Halkett, and said, "Close to Kensington Gardens. Nice spot, isn't it?"

"Oh, delightful!" she exclaimed, with fervour, "the best situation in London. How I envy Mrs. Reverdon!"

"Pass the bottle, Halkett, if you please."

The tone was sharp and elevated and decided, not like the voice he had spoken in last.

Lizzie Ashton guessed that she had gone a step too far, and she avoided the mention of his wife's name again.

The supper went on flourishingly. If the two men did not do much in the solid way, the lady did, and they made up for it by drinking. Cork after cork flew from the champagne bottles, to the imminent danger of the chandelier lustres, as Rex set them all ringing against one another, from the contact. His spirits rose higher and higher; his mirth was perfectly infectious. Lizzie Ashton's white teeth were displayed to greater advantage every minute, and every minute she grew more familiar, and he more talkative, until when the supper was at last decided to be over and the three rose to make a move, instead of going home as Rex had said he intended doing, he proposed that he and Halkett

should first leave Miss Ashton at her own door, and then make a night of it together.

“We *must* see Lizzie home first, Halkett. She’s a deal too pretty to go about London alone, at this time of night; ain’t you, Lizzie? We shall have some one running off with you, if we don’t mind.”

“Much you’d care,” said the girl, affectedly, as she looked back at him.

“Shouldn’t I though?” he answered; “that’s all you know about it, Lizzie. Anyway, it shan’t be to-night if I can help it.”

“Unless you run off with me yourself,” was the reply.

“Well, I’m not sure that I shan’t,” he answered; “at least, I would if Halkett wasn’t here.”

“I suppose you think Halkett would interfere?” interposed that gentleman, languidly.

“Well, I should think it very likely from the way Halkett has looked at Miss Ashton all the evening; but I don’t know in what way but one (that is, with the greatest admiration) any man could look at her.”

In such nonsense as this the time flew away till the cab had set them all three down at Miss

Ashton's lodgings—two second-rate little rooms over a shop in the Strand, which she insisted upon the two gentlemen mounting the little staircase to inspect.

"Jolly, snug little place, isn't it, Halkett?" exclaimed Rex. "I say, Lizzie, you must give us a turn-out here some night. Welsh-rabbit and spiced ale for three, and I'll sing you a comic song on the occasion."

"So I will," she answered, "if you'll promise to come, Rex. It's so jolly, our having met again. You must often come and see me play now, won't you?"

"Of course I shall," he said; "every other night if I can. Good-night, Lizzie."

There was nothing for them to stay for, and the two men had not sat down since their entrance. Miss Ashton rose again as Rex spoke to her, and held out her hand.

"Oh, come, Lizzie," he said, in his rollicking, jovial manner, "you used to give me something better than that."

And he kissed her as he spoke. Then Mr. Halkett shook hands with her, and the friends descended the staircase and re-entered the cab, which was waiting for them.

“Jolly little girl, isn’t she, Halkett?” exclaimed Rex, as the cab commenced to move on. “Poor little Liz! I’m quite glad to have met her again. You seem very intimate there now, Halkett.”

“I’ve seen more of her since you have been away, certainly,” rejoined the other. “Naturally, I suppose, being a friend of yours, she has affected my company to gain news of you. That girl’s very attached to you, Reverdon.”

“Ah, yes, I daresay so. Poor little woman, she always was,” said Rex (with the conceited air men assume when they speak of a girl who is supposed to be partial to them): “well, I’m very glad to have met her again. I must go and see her sometimes, and keep up her spirits. Where are we bound to, Halkett?”

“The deuce take me if I know,” answered his friend, not over-pleased at the cool way in which Rex spoke of Lizzie Ashton. “I don’t think we settled where we wished to go. Shall it be —— ?”

“All right,” replied Rex, not caring himself where they went, so long as it was to a place that should continue to keep up the unnatural

excitement he had worked himself into. "Cabby, drive to ——."

Of course *I* know the name of the place they went to, and what they did there, and all about it, but *I* do not choose to write it down here; firstly, because should *I* do so, Mrs. Grundy will say that *I* have been there myself, and refuse to believe that *I* have only received my information secondhand from the Rexes of my acquaintance; and secondly, because there are some places of which (however harmless the amusements they provide may be, taken in moderation) their names alone strike such horror into the minds of the uninitiated, that my book would be probably condemned as unfit for the drawing-room table were *I* to mention them. And that is what *I* trust *I* may never live to hear or see written of any book of mine. Notwithstanding which *I* must be allowed to say here, that *I* know, on the whole, that women think men, and men's places of resort, a great deal worse than they really are. *I* am sure that many a man would be shocked to think of himself as leading the life that many women, from their ignorance and fertile imaginations, set him down, in company with most men about town, as

leading ; and I have heard the same prejudiced sex speak of places—the entertainments at which, as I have said before, are innocent—as if they were sinks of iniquity. And if another woman happens to be better informed on the subject, they refuse to take her testimony, or to believe that she has been informed aright. “ Oh, of course *he* tells you so !”

Now, with respect to Rex Reverdon and Henry Halkett, although I have no great love for the latter, I have no wish to have the actions of my hero misconstrued ; therefore although, from a regard for the feelings of my lady readers, I have not written down the few letters which compose the name of the place they resorted to after leaving Lizzie Ashton at her lodgings, I beg to state that, listening to a few songs and a little good music—talking a great deal of nonsense and imbibing a great deal of liquid to wash the nonsense down—was the sum-total of their dissipation this evening. But unfortunately Rex was not in a state to commence a fresh evening and a fresh amount of drinking, and the consequence was, that the nonsense he talked became greater nonsense every minute, and the more he talked the thirstier he grew, until he found

himself, Heaven knows how, in his own bedroom at the “nest,” and somebody—he wasn’t quite sure if it was Halkett, or if it was Paul Bedford, or his mother, but at all events somebody was telling him to get off his things like a good fellow, and go to bed. Somebody stayed, too, until he was in bed, or he supposed so, and Lizzie Ashton was there still, to be sure; he had forgotten all about it. He had brought her in to supper. “Oh, let’s go in to supper, Halkett, old boy. Don’t keep a lady waiting. How cold it is! Come in to the fire. Why, what is the fellow about, turning off the gas? Don’t leave us in the dark, Halkett. I say, Halkett ——”

But if any one heard him it could only have been the landlady, and perhaps she was used to her lodgers “hollering out occasionally” after they had come home late, and took no notice of it. Rex opened his eyes. Why, where was he? Had he been dreaming? There was no Halkett, no supper, no lights—nothing. Was he in bed? Yes; these must be bedclothes over him; but, by Jove! he wasn’t undressed. And oh, by Jove! wasn’t it cold! He jumped out of bed as he spoke, and sat upon the outside of

it, shivering. Rex Reverdon was not a drunkard ; far from it ; he was not even a drinking man. This time and that other time when he went to the party at the Peyton's, are the only two occasions on which I can find that he really transgressed in this matter. But he was very excitable—very hot-headed, and easily overcome. And when liquor had taken hold of him, it was a long time before he shook the effects of it off again. As he sat shivering on the outside of his bed, he was, I regret to say it, very tipsy. His friend Halkett having seen him into his bedroom, had considered he had performed “the whole duty of man” towards him ; and how long he had been there Rex Reverdon knew not, and was not in a fit state to consider. As he sat there he could not even collect his thoughts sufficiently to recall the events of the evening, or how his misfortune had come about ; he had only a confused sense that he was not himself, and that he must go home to his wife. The “jolly” stage was over for poor Rex, and the desponding stage was setting in, and as he felt it creeping about him, and knew he was powerless to stave it off—powerless to become “jolly” again there in the dark and alone, the true

affection of his heart rose in the ascendant, and he felt an indescribable longing—more than that—an indescribable feeling that he *must*, at any risk, get home to Isobel before it took entire possession of him.

“I must go home to Isobel,” he kept on repeating to himself in thick undertones, as he staggered about the room to find a match whereabouts to light his candle.

It is curious, sometimes, to see how a man, when liquor has deprived him of all his other senses, will, if bent upon gaining an object, be able to do everything for himself which is connected with its attainment, though utterly helpless in other things. Rex found his matches, and lighted his candle, and walked downstairs, and unbolted the hall door, and found himself standing on the pavement outside, ready to go to Isobel, though bare-headed, and quite unconscious that he was so. It was a bleak night, or rather, morning—for the small hours were past and gone—and there was a cutting wind blowing from the north, which met Rex’s heated face and unprotected head, and nearly sliced it in two, yet he went on unheedingly. He had but one idea in his head, the wish to get into Iso-

bel's presence—that presence in which seemed for him now; protection, comfort, and forgiveness ; and with that view, he set his feet towards Wimbledon—I must not say steadily, for his wish to get there was the only steady thing about him. As the policemen on that beat saw him staggering from one side of the flags to the other in his endeavours to go straight-forward, his ruffled auburn hair and uncovered head bearing witness, with his faltering steps, to his condition, they only thought to themselves that here was “another on 'em going home *by rail*,” and did not think it worth their while to do more than give him a friendly injunction to “keep up, and look before him.” On, into the open country, and through the country roads. How he found his way along them—whether he paid his turnpikes, or evaded justice, he knows not, and I know not, to this day ; but about four hours after he had started from the hall-door of his uneasy “nest,” he found himself opposite his own at Wimbledon.

It was six o'clock in the morning ; but October mornings are dark and cold, and no one appeared stirring in the house, as he stood there, until, after repeated ringings, and long-

continued knocks, which alarmed not only Isobel, but the surrounding neighbours, a half-clothed servant opened the door to him, and he staggered up to his wife's bedroom ;—still, with the one idea in his head he entered it ;—that when he had reached her presence his trouble, whatever it was, would be over ; his fault, whatever it was, forgiven and wiped out for ever. She was standing in her dressing-gown as he came in, waiting to receive him, knowing it was him, and afraid that something dreadful must have occasioned his unusually early return ; but as soon as she saw him she knew the truth, and shrunk backwards. Yes, she loved him as her own soul ! But seeing him thus—insensible, disordered, imbecile-looking—she recoiled, though she hated herself the next moment for recoiling. It was the first time she had seen him overcome —the first time she had ever seen a man tipsy—and she could not help the feeling of repugnance which she experienced showing itself in her face. She recoiled, and he saw it—tipsy as he was, he saw and understood the action—and it drove all he had intended to say to her out of his confused head. Instead of speaking, he tumbled across the room to the bed from which she had

just risen, and threw himself upon it. Her first impulse, as soon as the shock was over, was that the servants should not know more of her husband's disgrace than was necessary, so she locked her door, and then knelt down, attired as she was, to light the fire, which was ready laid in the grate. Presently a servant, hearing her movements, tapped at the door. “Can I help you, ma'am?”

“No, thank you,” was the quiet answer.

“I must dress myself, then,” she thought. “He may want me when he wakes.”

She did not think a word more than this ; she did not reproach him, even to herself. “Can he have walked home ?” she wondered ; “walked through this bitter weather, and at such a time ? Oh, my darling ! How cold he is ! When will that fire burn up ?”

She stirred it, and heaped on coals, and stirred it again, until the flames were roaring up the wide-built, modern chimney, and the whole room was filled with the heat of it.

When she was dressed, she sat down by the bedside, and chafed his hands, and rained down kisses on his handsome face, as he commenced to stir uneasily in his besotted sleep.

You would have thought such a walk, at such a time, would have been enough to sober a man, but it was not. Half that distance, on a more genial morning, might have had the desired effect; but the fatigue and the extreme cold had only made the brandy Rex had taken fly the faster to his head, to which now the heat of the large fire his wife in her care for him had heaped up added its influence. As its warmth reached him, he no longer lay still, heavily breathing, and no more; he turned and tossed about in his slumbers, muttering to himself each time her lips or hands touched his, until the excitement he had laboured under in town returned to him, and his tongue commenced to obey the dictates of his half-conscious brain.

What was it that made Isobel, usually so gentle, so unsuspecting, and so affectionate, drop the hand she was clasping to her bosom with so much warmth, and look as if she had been stung? What could it be that made her start from her sitting position from her husband's side, and pace up and down the room, heedless whether he saw her or not, so that she was not compelled to sit still and listen to the random words that dropped from his mouth? What, but that his insensible

tongue, again unloosed, rambled on of the events of the past evening;—laughed with Halkett, jested with Lizzie Ashton, soliloquised with his own heart;—and though he mixed it all up with passionate appeals to Isobel to forgive him, and to take him to herself, yet as he never mentioned her by name, he left her still uninformed as to whom his love was addressed.

At last she could bear it no longer: she had withstood Lady Charlotte's inuendoes; she had fought against the promptings of her own heart, but she could not brook what she considered plain proofs from her husband's own mouth that he was unfaithful to her—that she had never been the one to occupy his affections. She was a noble, generous, warm-hearted woman; but she could not have been all this if she could have sat by quietly and heard what she heard, and been ready to kiss the offender directly he awoke and never allude to the subject again. She felt it acutely—too acutely to hide away entirely and smile at the recollection. As some fresh asseveration of love, to some person or persons unknown, burst from Rex's lips she rose up hastily and left the room;—left the room and locked him in alone, only peeping

in upon him every half-hour or so to see if he was again sensible.

"He is ungenerous," she thought; "he is unfaithful to me; he may be wicked, God only knows; but whatever the truth, he is my own husband, and no change in him can ever rob him of my love. Perhaps I have been the most to blame in charging him with it. Heaven have mercy on me!"

And so she watched and guarded, prayed for and tended him, until mid-day arrived and Rex Reverdon was himself again—a very humble, penitent edition of himself, and ready to acknowledge it.

Why, when he would have been the first to lay at her feet and confess his error, did Isobel appear studiously to avoid giving him the opportunity of doing so?

Why, when he was panting to say to her, "Take me, good angel of my life! take me to your breast, my lawful haven, and never let me wander from it more"—did she, usually so eager to prove her love, so ready to respond to the slightest show of ardour on his part, shrink from him when he touched her, and interrupt him when he attempted to explain his conduct?

He could not say ; his new-born passion for her had received a check when he least expected it ; when he could at last acknowledge that he was ready to love her, she seemed for the first time unwilling to receive his love.

And so, after a few attempts at explanation, he lay down again, more sullen than before, blaming her for what he should have blamed himself.

And she, bitterly lamenting his silence whilst she dreaded he should speak again, thought he lay brooding over an absent flame, and hid her grief within her own heart.

So these two people went about their separate ways resolved to misunderstand one another, at the very time when God had cleared the path of life for them, that they might come together and be blest.

CHAPTER X.

ELIZABETH ASHTON.

A FEW days after the supper had been given in poor Rex's "nest" Henry Halkett was waiting, not without a degree of impatience, in the sitting-room of Miss Ashton's apartments, until it should please that young lady to bestow the light of her countenance upon him. I have said that the rooms were second-rate in their appearance, and so they were, judging them by furnished apartments in general; but yet they were many degrees removed, in regard to the splendour of their adornments, from those of the little house at Islington to which their occupant had been accustomed. The ornaments which decorated them were vulgar in the extreme; the gilding about the mirror and backs of the sofa and chairs tarnished and worn; the stamped velvet which formed the foundation of most of

the articles of furniture of the commonest manufacture, and begrimed with the dirt of ten London seasons ; everything about the place, if once gaudy and bright, had always been in the worst taste, and now the whole collection looked more like the cast-off furniture of a doll’s house, of which the children had tired, and ceased to take care, than anything else, half of it being broken, half rickety, and all in a state of dirt. Some brown and yellow strips of muslin drawn before the window played the part of curtains, which was, after all, quite an unnecessary trouble for any muslin to take, for the windows were so thick with grease that a passer-by would have had keen sight indeed whose eyes could have penetrated their mysteries. But yet, with all their defects, the rooms were in the Strand, and their expense probably far more than the generosity of Mr. Jones of the Prince’s Theatre would lead you to expect that Miss Ashton would be able to afford. As Mr. Halkett impatiently pushed aside the yellow curtains and strove to see what was passing in the street below through the dulled panes of glass, he could just discern that the saddle-horses which he had left at the door were being led up and down by

the groom in attendance, and not kept shivering at the entrance of some gin-palace, whilst he was taking care of himself within. Two of them there were ; one with a lady's saddle on, and both supposed to be at Mr. Henry Halkett's expense. For Miss Lizzie Ashton having become a public character, must of necessity ride—as what public character does not, now-a-days ?—and give her numerous adorers an occasional chance of seeing how their midnight divinity looked off the stage, and of giving herself the treat of hearing them say, as she slowly walked her horse along the Row, “There goes Lizzie Ashton of the Prince's”—which certainly must have been a full and sufficient reward for the agony she endured in the attempt to be fashionable. For Miss Ashton's equestrian exercises, not having commenced till late in life, and not having continued sufficiently long as yet to make her position on horseback one of ease or pleasure, I really give her credit for the way in which she went through that performance, and the steadiness with which she persisted that she enjoyed it. I have said that the expenses of her saddle-horse were supposed to be defrayed by her friend Mr. Halkett, and I used the term “supposed”

judiciously. That gentleman had been what he called “going it, pretty considerably” during the last four months, notwithstanding which, I cannot find that his money had been going into his tradesmen’s pockets at the same rate as himself. His chum Reverdon, married and out of the way, Mr. Halkett, notwithstanding that the sum owed him in that quarter had been honourably paid with the rest of Rex’s debts, had sadly missed the many little luxuries he had been used to indulge in at his friend’s expense. Saddle-horses, good dinners, stalls at the opera, the best of gloves and tobacco ; these are hard things for a man to give up who has been accustomed to have them all his life, and without paying for them either—privations which you could hardly expect Mr. Halkett, or any one, short of a stoic or philosopher, to resign. And if you did expect, you would have been disappointed, for he continued to enjoy them just the same, with this exception, that whilst Rex Reverdon was away no one paid for them. And since no one was chargeable, Mr. Halkett thought that he might just as well procure luxuries for two as for one ; which is just the style of argument that I should expect a man of Mr. Halkett’s calibre to use.

So Miss Lizzie Ashton came in for a share of the good things, which accounts for the two saddle-horses and her friend being kept waiting whilst she assumed her riding-habit on the day I have mentioned to you. He had not seen her since the evening of the supper, having had business to detain him, and pleasures he liked better ; but he had made this appointment to ride with her in writing the day before, and she had promised to be punctual. At last he seemed to get a little impatient, for he commenced to walk up and down the room, restlessly, and at length to rap with his cane against the folding-doors which divided the apartment.

"I say, Lizzie, are you going to keep these horses waiting in the cold all day? I've been here half-an-hour already."

"*Do* have a *little* patience," replied her voice from within, sharply, "a woman can't change her dress in one minute."

"You ought to have changed it before I came then," he answered.

"*Ought, ought*," she said, as she pushed open the folding-doors and entered the sitting-room, "is that a word to use to a lady?"

She looked far better in her riding-habit than

she had done the last time we saw her, but she had a white feather in her low-brimmed hat (I write of 1851, remember), and her flaxen hair was too much displayed for good taste, which spoilt her hopes, if she had any, of passing for a gentlewoman.

“I wish you wouldn’t wear that feather when you ride with me, Lizzie,” remarked Halkett, peevishly, as he caught sight of it, “I have told you so before.”

“I shall wear what I choose, Mr. Halkett, and I’ve told you that before too, I believe. You needn’t ride with me, if you don’t like to do so. Pray do I look so *very* bad?”

She turned towards him as she spoke, with a smile that seemed to ask for the compliments he was generally ready enough to give her. But he was certainly cross to-day, annoyed at something, for he only said:

“You look very much the same as usual, as far as I can see.” And then speaking quicker, he added: “By-the-by, Lizzie, you played your cards very badly the other evening.”

This was the secret offence then. Lizzie Ashton understood what he meant perfectly, but like a true woman she feigned ignorance.

"What evening? How do you mean?"

"You know as well as I do," he replied; "the other night with Rex Reverdon. What made you take up that friendly, familiar tone with him, as if everything was comfortably arranged between you, and on your part forgiven and forgotten? You've spoilt your game altogether. The fellow's manner changed directly; a child might have seen it."

"Well, what tone would you have had me take up?"

"Not that one, and you knew it, too. Why, Reverdon was as nervous of meeting you as he could be. When I proposed going to the Prince's he became as agitated as possible, and if you had only played the injured innocent with him, (as you know so well how to play,) you might have done anything with him. Anything, I repeat. *Anything.*"

"And suppose I didn't want to do anything?" she replied. "Suppose I knew better than you, and saw it would be no use even trying to do anything. Why that man's no more in love with me now, Halkett, than he is with you."

"You're wrong," he repeated, "you're alto-

gether wrong; but it's no use trying to convince a woman against her will.”

“I should think I ought to know the symptoms of love better than you,” she answered.

“Do you really?” he said, sneeringly. “I didn't suppose you had ever felt the sensation yourself.”

She turned upon him a look of such scorn that his eyes shrank before it, whilst hers, usually so cold and hard, sparkled as if they were diamonds.

“Didn't you?” she said, drawing her breath more quickly as she spoke.

He saw the accusation annoyed her, and he repeated it.

“Indeed I did, and I do. I should imagine you the very last woman in the world to have had any experience of the ‘tender passion.’” And as he said the two last words he accompanied them with a slight, sniggering laugh, which acted like oil upon fire, to the woman's kindling rage. “I thought £. s. d. was much more in your line than *L o v e*. I didn't think you even believed in such a thing!”

“You think,” she said, eagerly interrupting him, “that because I have played upon the

feelings of a man like Rex Reverdon, in order to get money out of him, that because I allow a man like yourself to make love to me and take the benefits you may please to bestow in exchange, that therefore I am not a woman, that I have never been a woman, with a woman's heart, a woman's capability of loving?"

"I certainly have thought so," he returned coolly, fondly stroking down his nails the while, and trimming their rounded tips with his pen-knife.

"You imagine, because I have been hawked about by my wretched father ever since I was saleable, put up in the market-place of every town we lived in to be bidden for, almost thrust down the throats of men who had no wish to marry me, that I never had a softer heart, a more modest nature, than is mine now? That this kind of life was never distasteful to me, that I have never thought that I would rather be of the poorest poor, so that the food I eat and the clothes I wore I was indebted to no one for but myself, and my honest labour?"

"I certainly have thought so," he repeated, not even looking up from his occupation.

"I dare say you have," she answered.

“ Your own nature is too bad for you to be able to afford to think any good of others. Rex Reverdon would have given me credit for it, I know—would give me credit for it even now, though his passion for me has died out. He is worth ten of you.”

“ Complimentary,” he returned ; “ but if true, why don’t you stick to him ?”

“ Because he’s too good to be ‘ stuck to,’ as you call it,” she replied. “ He has been good to me all along. I’ll have nothing more to do with him. If he’s found another love, all the better for him. I loved once, and—”

“ Now did you *really* ?” inquired Halkett, with an incredulous stare, which almost made Elizabeth Ashton strike the face he upturned to hers.

“ Did I *really* ?” she echoed. “ Yes, *really*. Love such as you, and others like you, can never know. Yes, I did love Henry Halkett, years ago—good God, how many years ago it seems!—when I was young and fresh and innocent, and carried that inconvenient thing about with me they call a heart. I loved with all I had—my heart, my soul, my mind, and my strength—and I was deceived. That’s the

secret of my life, Halkett,—that's the sum total of my existence—of the existence of how many women as heartless as myself! I loved, and I was deceived. I ventured the happiness of my whole life upon one throw, and I lost it. I embarked all I possessed worth calling riches upon one vessel, and it sank. I lavished all the love my heart contained,—I threw my very heart itself away,—upon one man, and he left me ; and then all that was good in me, all that might have been good, died and withered away. That man was my moral murderer. No other heart sprang up in place of the one he took with him, no other goodness bloomed instead of that he trampled down, no other faith appeared to fill the vacancy *he* left, when he destroyed my faith in him and all the world. Since then I have been what you see me, what you have known me to be—utterly heartless, deceitful, and mercenary, trading upon my good looks and my power through their means of procuring the necessaries of life, which my drunken father never took the trouble to procure me. I know I am what you say,—that all feeling, except the love of a little luxury, perhaps, is dead in me—that, as far as the enjoyment of life goes, I am,

to all intents and purposes, dead myself; but it was a man like yourself who killed me !”

“ What was his name ?” asked Halkett, quietly.

At this, she turned upon him furiously—

“ I am used to insult,” she said, “ of all kinds ; particularly from you, Mr. Halkett ; but I never received a worse one, even from your mouth. You may think I am not a woman—you may say I’m a devil, if you choose—a fiend—anything ; it little matters to me ; but I *am female*, and *once loved* with us—*once really loved*—is twice sacred.”

Her hand was on her breast as she spoke, her eyes were kindling under the remembrance of her wrongs ; her words dropped deliberately and clearly from her lips. If Mr. Jones could have seen her at that moment he would have thought twice about raising her salary and putting her on in the tragedy line. For once in her life (the life during which we have known her), Elizabeth Ashton looked a woman. But the mood was over—almost with the words. In another moment she was herself again ; not so interesting, but more natural.

“ Come, my dear Henry,” she said, assuming

a much lighter air, as she patted him on the shoulder, “you and I mustn’t quarrel ; we can’t afford to do it. We have all had such little episodes in our younger days, and it is lucky if we none of us think more of them than I do of mine. I hope I haven’t frightened you ; big words cost nothing, you know.”

For the man had really been staring at her as if he scarcely knew her under the new character she had assumed ; but her present tone reassured him.

“ Well, you really have been going it, Lizzie !” he exclaimed. “ You must have been rehearsing Lady Macbeth, or some of those grand tragedy parts, on the quiet, I think.”

“ Never mind ; it’s all over now,” she said, sitting down beside him ; “ but you shouldn’t tease me, Henry. And now, look here, don’t worry me any more about Rex Reverdon, because it will only be lost labour, I can tell you ; for the man’s cured ; I don’t know how, or when —perhaps his wife has done it ; all the better for him if she has—but, anyway, it’s done. He does not care for me any longer, and I won’t try to bring it on again.”

“ But I want you to get some cash out of him

for me, Lizzie. I’m dreadfully hard up, as you know, and I must get money somehow.”

“Well, you must ask him for it, then, and say I’m in want ; but if he isn’t willing, Halkett, or very ‘flush,’ don’t bleed him, there’s a good fellow. I can’t forget Rex in the days of old ; how generous he used to be to that poor father of mine—indeed, to both of us. I don’t half like your getting money out of him on my account.”

“I believe you are ‘spooney’ on him, after all,” said Halkett, jealously.

“I believe I am, a little,” she replied, simply ; and then added : “I say, are we never going to start for our ride this afternoon ? Good gracious me ! It’s four o’clock already. Do make haste !”

“It’s all your fault,” he rejoined ; “here have I been waiting for the last hour, listening to your grandiloquent ravings.”

“Well, come along then, now,” she answered, with her usual sharpness. All the soft mood had vanished : it is the first time we have ever seen such a mood take hold of Elizabeth Ashton. I believe it was almost the last time it ever appeared in her. No one who had seen her half-an-hour afterwards, as she took her way with Mr. Hal-

kett to the Park, would have imagined that any other feelings than those depicted in her face and manners—utter carelessness, undue mirth, and an apparent disbelief in anything like virtue—had ever taken possession of and swayed her, as we have seen her swayed in the little sitting-room in the Strand. Lizzie Ashton on horse-back was not at all a person that a man had need to be ashamed of being seen in company with, although she may not have looked as if she belonged to the “upper ten thousand” that Mr. Anthony Trollope is so fond of talking about. She was not, as yet, of sufficient note upon the stage to be readily recognised as an actress ; her character was good, and her dress unobjectionable ; although, perhaps, the falling golden hair, and the white feather, attracted a little more notice than a gentleman cares to have attracted to the companion of his walk or ride.

Yet, these little disadvantages put to one side, I think Mr. Halkett (being a man who, as long as the public could be led to believe that his conquests were very numerous, was not particular from what class he singled his victims) was rather proud than otherwise of showing himself off in the Park by the side of Miss Ashton, and

I am sure that there were many men of the same stamp as himself, who were foolish enough to envy him the post of honour there. But yet, notwithstanding that their little quarrel had been still more definitely made up than I have described it before they left Miss Ashton's house, and all between them was supposed to be peace, Mr. Halkett did not talk so much, nor appear so cheerful, as his fair companion would have had him do. She was very lively herself; all the more so, perhaps, that she felt there was an unpleasant remembrance to be wiped out between them; but all her witcheries failed to draw him into partnership with her improved spirits. He remained moody and abstracted, riding by her side with his eyes downcast and his thoughts absent; answering to her merry sallies with a short acquiescence, or the remark that he “didn't know;” and making himself altogether a very unsatisfactory riding companion for a lively young woman like Lizzie Ashton. She, thinking that he was jealously ruminating upon the peep she had permitted him to take into her past life, blamed herself for her sentimental folly, and resolved to remove the impression she had caused from his mind as soon

as possible. But Halkett's absent manner was not attributable to anything so flattering to the power of Miss Ashton's charms. He did not care whether she had loved once before, or twenty times before. His present disappointment lay in the fact that she had refused to pretend she loved for the one-and-twentieth time. Her resolution—and Halkett felt that she was resolved—not to have anything more to do with Rex Reverdon, considerably annoyed him ; upsetting, as it did, several of his own plans. He had intended making this woman his cat's-paw ; and if she had burnt her fingers in the attempt, he would, if necessary, have cut her dead the next day, without a pang. But now he should have to get the chestnuts for himself, or he feared so ; but he was not without hopes that Lizzie Ashton might yet be brought to see the thing in a better light. Perhaps he was turning over the method of making her do so in his own mind, as he rode silently by her side. Anyway, he must certainly have been very much lost in thought, or he could not have permitted himself and his companion to run against the very people he would have done anything to avoid.

“How d'ye do, Rex ?”

The words were from Miss Ashton's mouth. Halkett started as from a dream, expecting to see Rex Reverdon on horseback or on foot, not quite prepared to meet the gaze of Isobel, seated by her husband's side in the low park-phaeton, which was the only carriage they could boast of, her calm eyes fixed upon the face of his companion with a look in which astonishment and indignation seemed to strive for the uppermost seat. Halkett took off his hat. Rex Reverdon did the same, and then the pony carriage had passed them—the eyes of the two women fixed upon one another to the last.

“Confound you, Lizzie! what the deuce do you mean by speaking to Reverdon before his wife?” angrily exclaimed Halkett, with more emphasis than politeness, to the lady by his side, as he turned round in his saddle to confront her as soon as the others were out of hearing.

She tossed her head, as women will toss it when men dare to find fault with them.

“What do I care if his wife is with him or not with him? Do you think I'm going to pass an old friend by without noticing him? Those are your manners, I suppose, Mr. Halkett?”

“Why can't you bow, then, like a lady, and

keep your tongue between your teeth ? There'll be a row between them now, as sure as fate. Mrs. Reverdon is certain to ask who you are!"

"Well ! and if she does, what matter ? Ain't I fit to speak to him even ?" And thereupon Miss Lizzie Ashton's tongue began to run, as ladies' tongues *can* run when they are angry ; and I am afraid if she and Halkett parted in amity at all that afternoon, that there must have been a fresh cementing of their friendship in the Strand apartments, for the wound, if wound it was, was very widely pulled open again. And Miss Ashton's voice was raised so high, and attracted so much notice from the loungers in the Park, that although Halkett was really annoyed at the circumstance, I think he would have given a great deal, before they reached home again, to have bound her over to keep the peace, even at the expense of owning that he was in the wrong. The Reverdons had been taken quite as much by surprise as he had. There had been little pleasure to them in the drive ; there had been little pleasure to them in anything since the unfortunate morning that Rex had come home tipsy. Isobel, usually so loving and devoted, so ready to invite confidences

on her husband's part, had been unusually silent and depressed ; and he, conscious that he had offended, and too proud to ask how, shut himself up in a cold and haughty reserve, and tried to persuade himself that he had never advanced so much as one jot or tittle from the icy indifference with which he had commenced the courtship of his present wife. His offer to drive her out, on the day in question, had been quite mechanical, her acceptance as mechanically given, and there had been almost as little conversation between them, during its course, as had been enjoyed by Halkett and Lizzie Ashton. Rex had espied the latter some time before she passed and accosted him, but it was impossible for *him* to turn ; he had hoped she would do so ; and when he perceived that such was not her intention, still he never dreamt that she would take the liberty of speaking to him.

When Isobel heard so familiar a greeting from the lips of an attractive-looking woman, and met at the same time a hard unflinching stare from her eyes directed at herself, she naturally turned to her husband for an explanation of the reason. What she saw in him did not tend to reassure her. Rex, instead of sharing

her well-merited indignation, had blushed up to his ears, and was foolishly playing with the reins which he held, with his gaze anywhere but in the direction of her face.

"Rex, who is that person?" she asked, in a tone which showed she expected the answer to be an unpleasant one.

Rex had not the face to say "Who do you mean?" because the wave of the white feather was not yet out of sight, or the tones of the voice out of hearing. So he rushed into the other extreme and took refuge in a great show of bravery.

"Oh! that's Lizzie Ashton, of the Prince's Theatre; pretty little girl, isn't she?"

I wish he hadn't mentioned her name, he would have saved Isobel so much pain. Yet how could he have known that it had been on and off his lips every five minutes in his drunken sleep of a few days before?

"Have you known her long, Rex?" next asked his wife, but her voice trembled a little as she put the question, and the words came out of lips that had turned very white at his last answer.

"Yes, pretty well; she's one of my bachelor

acquaintances, or used to be ; but Halkett seems to have stepped in as first friend there lately.”

Here he wanted to put in something that should undeceive his wife, if she had any idea that he wished to retain Miss Ashton’s acquaintanceship now that he was married, but in his wish to appear unembarrassed he tripped over so many sentences, and misused so many words, that the only impression he left on her mind was, that he was trying to deceive her as to his intimacy with the girl in question. For that he was or had been intimately connected with her, Isobel retained no doubt, when she remembered the familiar manner in which he had mentioned her name whilst he was tipsy, and in which she had mentioned his when speaking to him to-day.

Then she felt a dull, sickening pain creep up all round and about her heart, until it turned cold, and little stabs like the sting of a poisonous animal dart through it every now and then, beneath which she involuntarily shuddered.

People may talk of pain if they like—the pain of separation, of suspense, of the want of love, even of death itself when it happens to our dearest ; but is there any mental pain to compare in its intensity whilst lasting, its craving

for forgetfulness, its gnawing agony, and its dull despair, like the pain of jealousy?—of the first reasonable doubt that we have ever entertained of the creature we live for?

Other griefs receive amelioration from sympathy; we can cry ourselves exhausted upon bosoms not so dear as the bosom cold, but still friendly and anxious to soothe us; but jealousy has no such relief; its property is to mourn alone, to shut itself up with its own hard thoughts, its bitter doubts, its harrowing suspense; it is too proud to speak, to ask questions, or demand explanations; its nature is to lie down and let the worm at its heart's core gnaw, and devour, as it will, until its best and most generous feelings are embittered and blackened by the contact, and sometimes even when the clear light of truth has removed the disease, leaves it too hardened, too cicatrized by pain ever to love again. But Isobel's was not a nature to wear itself out by jealousy. She was not, like Lady Charlotte Huntley, suspicious, and obdurate, and unconvinced. She was of an open, honest disposition, and would have believed all men open and honest like herself; but appearances were

strongly against Rex, and the first pangs of jealousy which had assailed her were very bitter and very hard to bear.

She had often *said* that Rex was so much younger than herself, that she was too old for him, and he might find some one else he would love better; but she had never believed it. Now all Mr. Peyton’s tales of her husband’s wild life, and of his marrying her only for her money,—all Lady Charlotte’s cruel hints and inuendoes,—came back to her with double force as she applied them for herself. She was ready to tell him that he was false, that he had been mercenary, and ungenerous towards her; and had she loved him less, she might have done so. But she worshipped this man; she, with all the weight of her thirty years upon her, would have almost given her life, as she sat beside him in the pony carriage, to have had the words and the actions of the last few days unsaid and undone for her. But she remembered that she had married Rex in the very face of warning, and she thought she had thereby forfeited her right to question him, and that her duty lay in suffering and silence.

And as for him, he would have given his

right hand at this time to have been able to say, “Isobel, I love you ;” but there are some natures to whom to humble themselves is harder than to sever a limb, and such a nature was Rex Reverdon’s. He saw that she was hurt, silent and reserved ; he felt that she was suffering for some mistake respecting himself, and yet he had too much pride to undeceive her ; too much pride to enable him to speak out, and make himself and her happy. Pride built up so mighty a barrier between these two that when Rex Reverdon handed his wife out of the carriage that evening, and followed her into the privacy of their own rooms, there was a greater division between their spirits than any erection of brick and mortar, even the famous wall of China itself, could have made between their bodies ; for no separation is so complete, and so completely hard to bear, as a separation between hearts that love.

CHAPTER XI.

IN WHICH ISOBEL IS FOOLISH, AND REX WORSE.

MISS BURNETT was bending with tender solicitude over her geraniums. Like many other women, who have denied themselves, or been denied by force of circumstances, the rightful occupation of a woman's life, that is, the care of a man's house and rearing of his children, all her great capability of affection, cheated of a more legitimate outlet, overflowed in a measure which would have been ridiculous under other circumstances towards her flowers and her bird, a draggle-tailed, smoke-dried little canary, who never sung a note, but in whose powers of song his mistress had the most unbounded faith. To hear Miss Burnett talk of a slip of geranium which she had set herself in a pot the size of a tea-cup; to listen to her wonderings if it had really taken root; her prophecies of how soon

it would flower ; her self-reproaches if she had forgotten to water it, or move it to the light ; and her lamentations, addressed to the geranium-slip itself, that more sun did not shine in at the windows of her little rooms for its especial benefit, would have provoked a smile if one had not remembered how little she had to make her life less lonely ; how little a woman must have who can talk to a bit of stick for company ! As for the canary, he being alive and a gentleman (at least, Miss Burnett always insisted that the bird belonged to the nobler sex, although something very like a smashed egg had once been found at the bottom of his cage), I don't believe if he had worn coat and trousers that his mistress would have talked to him more than she did, or even so much. She never sat down to a meal without the "Count" (for so she called him) on the table beside her, when she would open the door of his cage and let her little bedraggled friend loose, to disport himself over her tablecloth, which he would do to the old lady's intense delight, dipping his smoky tail into the milk-pot, and leaving the tiny mark of his sanded toes upon her shoulder. I don't know what Miss Burnett would have done

without the “Count.” As she bent over her geraniums on the day I mention, and trimming their leaves here and there with her scissors, wondered if she should keep them alive and green during the fast approaching winter, she stopped every now and then to peer at him through her tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles, and ask his opinion on the subject.

“They have been such fine plants all through the summer, haven’t they, ‘Count?’” said the old lady, as she loosened the mould about their roots with a piece of stick; “and having been dear Isobel’s gift, we should be so sorry to see them die, shouldn’t we, ‘Count?’”

And the “Count” really seemed as if he understood what she said, for he came as close to the bars of his cage as his perch would permit him, and there listened, with his head on one side.

“Bless me!” exclaimed Miss Burnett, presently, as a thundering double-knock startled her from her occupation, “who can that be? someone for the other lodgers, I suppose.”

But Miss Burnett was wrong, for as the door was answered the light impatient footsteps ascended the stairs and entered her room.

It was Isobel.—

“Bless me!” exclaimed the old lady again as she stood, staring through her spectacles at her unexpected visitor, her gloved hands covered with mould, held out helplessly before her, “I never recognised your knock, my dear, you generally give such a gentle one. I thought it was somebody for downstairs. How cold you look, Isobel! Sit down by the fire, dear, until I have washed my hands, for I’m not fit to touch you.” And as Miss Burnett bustled into the next room, kissing her old pupil’s forehead as she passed, Isobel did her bidding, and drew a chair close by the little fire. She looked pale and worn, and older than we have seen her look before. The blush roses which laid against her face seemed bright pink against the pallor of her cheeks, and there were dark lines underneath her eyes which told of either sleepless nights, or unpleasant thought by day. As her old governess left her alone, she drew her velvet cloak impatiently about her, and gave a deep sigh, and then she sat, her head upon her hand, never heeding that the folds of her dress were lying over the little black fender and almost against the little black bars; so occupied was she with her own sad thoughts.

“ Isobel, my dear, just look at your dress,” cried Miss Burnett, in horror, as she returned ; “ why it’s right against the dirty grate, and oh, dear ! oh, dear ! you’ve marked it,” she added, as she drew away the delicate grey silk folds, and lamented over their disfigurement.

“ Oh ! never mind !” said Isobel, with the utmost indifference, as she impatiently tucked her dress beneath her chair. “ Are you quite well, Miss Burnett ?”

“ Are *you* quite well, my dear ? I think that’s more to the purpose. Has anything worried you, Isobel ?”

“ I’ve just come from Torrington Square,” she answered, “ and the very sight of that house is enough to worry any one.”

Isobel had not held much communication with her sister’s family since her marriage. Lady Charlotte had said at that time that she should not “ trouble Torrington Square much,” and she had religiously kept to her resolution.

One formal morning call after the ceremony, and a similar return from Mrs. Peyton at “ The Oaks,” was the extent of the civilities which had been exchanged between the two houses. But with the Reverdons of course it was

different. Mr. and Mrs. Peyton had dined with them several times at Wimbledon, and they had done the same in Torrington Square, but there was not sufficient congeniality of disposition between the sisters to make more familiar intercourse a pleasure to either of them, added to which, what the Peytons had said relative to her husband, before her marriage, had placed an obstacle in the way of their intimacy which would never be done away with, as long as Isobel loved Rex as she loved him at present. In the meanwhile, she looked in upon them whenever she had an opportunity, and had come into town that afternoon for the sole purpose of seeing them and Miss Burnett.

"Are they going on as badly as ever," inquired that lady, compassionately.

"Worse, I think," rejoined Isobel; "the house looks dirtier than ever, and Fanny can't get a housemaid to stay since Mary left. She wants me to give her back Mary, but I'm sure the girl wouldn't return. Who would, amongst all those unruly children, and the continual fuss and fidget on my sister's part?"

Miss Burnett was silent, and she continued:

"The two younger children were getting

over the measles so well, and now Fanny has let them take cold and they'll be in bed again for a month, I suppose. Just like her mismanagement!”

Very like Mrs. Peyton's mismanagement doubtless, but very unlike Mrs. Reverdon's sweet voice and usual excuses for other people's failings. Miss Burnett could only look at her with astonishment, and wait patiently for her own explanation of the reason of the change.

“ Fanny has been abusing Charlie to-day, by way of providing entertainment for me,” she went on to say. “ She said that ‘ Fred ’ (as if I cared what *Fred* said, or thought) thinks it a great pity that I wrote letters to Melbourne in hopes of their reaching him ; and that if the person whose name I saw mentioned in the paper should prove to be my brother, that he has most likely connected himself with a set of people very different to ourselves, and whom it would be no credit to us to know. Different to Fred, I suppose, and Fanny and the rest of them ; all the better I should think if they were.”

“ But if your brother should have connected himself, in that rough life, with people who are

not of his own birth, that is no reason that you should know them, or be ever brought in contact with them, Isobel."

"I know that," she replied, almost crossly; "but when was it any use to speak to those Torrington Square people, or try to convince them? If dear Charlie came home to-morrow, and they didn't choose to acknowledge him, I'd cut them all dead."

"You don't mean that, Isobel; your own life is bright enough now, my dear, to enable you to make allowances for the whims of those who have not the same happy prospects—for I think poor Fanny's prospects, with her large family and her thriftless husband, are anything but bright."

"Do you call it a whim," Isobel asked, hotly, "to speak against your own brother? the only brother we have. I do mean what I said, Miss Burnett, that when Charlie comes home, if the Peyton's choose to cut him, they may cut me too."

"Well, well, dear child, he's not home yet."

The soothing tone—as she might have spoken to a fractious child—the sense of momentary superiority conveyed in the juvenile appellative, irritated Isobel in her then mood, which was

rather irascible, and I am afraid her next words were delivered with a certain amount of temper.

“I think every one of our lives is a mistake,” she said; “we are placed here to make each other happy, and we seem to take the greatest pleasure in making each other miserable; we refuse half the love which might be ours for some absurd prejudice about birth, or manners, or conduct, and we sigh and strain after another, perhaps, that is out of our reach, just because it is so.”

Miss Burnett was quite ready to acknowledge the general justice of Isobel’s remark, but she could not perceive its aptitude to the subject under discussion.

“That may be very true, my dear Isobel,” she answered, “but I can’t see how it applies to yourself. You, who have a husband, of whom you have often told me you are only afraid you are *too* fond, and every comfort round you that you can desire.”

But Isobel took no notice of this remark. “Miss Burnett,” she said, “do let me have some of your translations to do, I have plenty of time on my hands, and I want some regular employment so much.”

She had asked for them before now, since her marriage, but her friend had refused to let her undertake them. Isobel Reverdon, happily married and surrounded by her husband's relations, was a very different person to Isobel Fane, sitting day after day, alone in her room in Torrington Square, and longing for something to divert her thoughts from the monotony of her life. Miss Burnett thought, and justly, that her time now belonged to her husband's pleasures and her husband's requirements, not to helping her friends, and therefore she had been firm in her refusal. But it was difficult to deny anything to the wet face and pleading eyes which were upturned to her on the present occasion.

"My dear Isobel, I am sure you would find plenty to do, if you only looked about you. Don't you paint now?"

"Sometimes."

"And sing?"

"A little—not often."

"And work?"

"Very seldom; I never cared for work you know."

"But I suppose you are a great deal at Lady Charlotte's, Isobel?"

Her eyes brightened a little now.

“ Yes, I see Gabriel every day; but he is getting very weak, and sleeps away a good deal of his time.”

“ But then your husband must want you?”

“ He is often out,” answered Isobel; and then blushing, she added, “ Oh! Miss Burnett! let me have some of the translations, let me take some home with me, to-day. I am sure they would do me good. I used to be so happy when I thought I was helping you.”

“ My dearest Isobel,” said Miss Burnett, coming close to her old pupil and sitting down beside her, “ you know that no one appreciates such evidences of affection on your part more than I do, but I could not feel justified in letting you devote part of your days in my service until I was assured that the time was not needed for something more important. For what was optional to you before, Isobel, when you had no one to care about them, the keeping up of your various accomplishments, becomes a duty now, when you have a home of your own, and are bound, as far as in you lies, to make it a pleasant one.”

“ Oh! but you don’t understand Rex,” said

Isobel, rather awkwardly, as she ground the point of an umbrella she held into the toe of her boot; “he is not a man who cares about such things, and I have plenty of time to myself. Do let me have the translations, Miss Burnett. Let me feel I’m of *some* good.”

She told more than she intended in her last words, but Miss Burnett was resolute in her refusal.

“No, Isobel!” she said, “if you have plenty of time fill it up with painting and music, which you acknowledge you neglect. I can do all the work I need, my dear, and more if I chose to do it. Your employment should lie at home.”

Isobel was annoyed now. She was not perfect, and this was one of her worst days—a day when Rex had been religiously cold to her all the morning—and sent her into town in a sad mood, which Fanny’s inanities and abuse of her absent brother had turned into a bad one.

“Well, I don’t care,” she said, indifferently, or professing to be so, “you can do as you like, I only offered ou of kindness.”

“I know that, my dear,” rejoined Miss Burnett, “and I only refused out of kindness. I have no wish to see you idle, Isobel, but I want to see

you take up the right work instead of the wrong. If you will not be angry at my saying so, I think you have not employed yourself enough lately, and so have allowed this restless, dissatisfied mood to come upon you unawares. Perhaps your present life is too easy and soft for you, Isobel, and presents a great many temptations to be idle, but you remember what we have often agreed together in olden days, that it is more difficult to bear wealth and luxury and happiness well, than it is to bear hardships, because the effect of one is to draw us nearer to heaven, and the other to tempt us to forget it.”

“It’s easy to *talk*,” said Isobel, using in her impetuosity the very argument which she had successfully combated in poor Gabriel but a short time before.

“Very much easier than to act: I know it is, my dear, but you are a woman who can do both, and do them well. Every phase of life has its drawbacks (Miss Burnett had guessed already that Isobel was not on terms of intimacy with her mother-in-law), and when we are very closely surrounded by blessings we are apt to make mountains out of molehills, from sheer want of something to grumble at; but your

lines have been cast in very pleasant places, Isobel."

Isobel's face was resolutely turned from that of her friend, but as the kind familiar voice sounded on her ear, speaking comfort for the unknown trouble, something commenced to rise in her throat, and she shook her head more than once, as if to throw back again the tears which refused to remain unshed.

"I often think, my dear," continued Miss Burnett, "that it would do many young people good—happy, prosperous young people like yourself—sometimes to visit the places that I visit, and to hear the tales that I hear. I have no money to give away, as you know, but I have a little time, and since it is all I have to bestow, I trust that Heaven accepts it as much as if it were more serviceable bounty."

Bounty, indeed! as many a poor wretch could have testified, whose dying bed had been cheered and unalienable right to glory made clear to him by the presence and the instruction of this woman who so humbly hoped that Heaven would not overlook her services. But of this she was too modest to speak herself.

"I have filled the office of Bible-reader to

one of the large hospitals near here, for several years past, and in that capacity have seen and conversed with some thousands of patients who have been admitted within its walls. Oh, Isobel! there has been suffering, if you like. There has been pain,—not only bodily suffering, but deep mental pain; diseases brought on by anguish of mind; fearful self-inflicted wounds, and other bodily harm, from distress of mind: deaths even taking place from the same cause, far away from their own friends, perhaps with the quarrel unsettled—the injury unatoned for—the forgiveness unreceived; all the misery and misunderstanding which brought them to that place—or being there, so aggravated their sufferings—in full force up to the last hour of life, leaving its impress even after death in the unpeaceful distorted features, and the want of that look of rest which happier corpses retain. Sometimes, when I have come from such scenes, I have wondered that we ordinarily-happy mortals ever dare to murmur or find fault with our lot.”

Isobel’s tears were falling fast now, dropping one by one upon her silk dress, but she neither stirred nor brushed them away.

"Such histories as I have heard," said Miss Burnett, "such stories of want and ill-treatment and sin, as would curdle your very blood to listen to; and with it all—sometimes, such patience; such an absence of complaint; such full and heavenly forgiveness for injuries received. I am a lonely woman, Isobel; so lonely, as you know, that you have often laughed at me for making companions out of my flowers, and holding a one-sided conversation with my bird; but though I have out-lived all my own friends, and pretty nearly all my enjoyment in this world, I have often and often, on coming home from my hospital work, fallen down upon my knees to thank the Almighty that He has given me so much peace and so many pleasures, compared to thousands of my suffering fellow-creatures." The old lady had just taken off her spectacles to wipe away a sudden fog which had risen upon her glasses; when, before she could replace them, she was startled by Isobel suddenly turning round and throwing herself upon her bosom, in a flood of hysterical tears. Very tenderly did Miss Burnett hold the suffering woman—just as she might have held her twenty years before, when she had been first

engaged by Miss Murray to become the governess of her adopted child. She did not press her for a reason, or express the least surprise at her emotion. She had seen from Isobel's first entrance that something was wrong, and she hoped that these tears would wash it all away. So she only held her closer to herself, and occasionally pressed her lips upon the white forehead, which was the only part of her face that she could see. Little by little the storm of passion exhausted itself, the sobs grew less violent, the breath more evenly drawn, and the tears slower, until there was one long deep sigh, and the fit of weeping was over.

“Oh, Miss Burnett!” said Isobel, lifting up her tear-stained face and making an attempt at smiling, “what a goose you must think me! I was in a shocking bad temper when I came in to-day; but it is quite too bad I should vent it upon you—you dear old thing,” she added, kissing her warmly, and nearly beginning to cry again at the action.

“Perhaps you are not quite well, dear Isobel,” answered Miss Burnett; “you may have over-tired yourself; however, you will be better now that you have had your ‘cry’ out.

Go into my room, love, and bathe your eyes before you think of going into the streets again."

After which Isobel looked so much like herself, that few strangers would have guessed, on seeing her, that she had been indulging in the feminine luxury alluded to,—and say what people will, it *is* a luxury sometimes. But after she had left Miss Burnett to go home with a smile on her lip and a gay farewell word on her tongue, she cost that lady a good deal of quiet "thinking over," as she sat with no one but the "Count" for company in her little room, for the rest of the evening.

"How strange it is," she mused, "that with some natures prosperity does not seem to agree, and yet I never thought that that would be the case with Isobel. Yet, when she was living with her sister, her comfort unconsulted and herself uncared for, worried by Fanny and the children, and no peace or happiness apparently on any side, how bravely she withstood it all! in what noble, generous, colours she showed herself! I thought then I had never seen a woman I admired so much as Isobel, and I felt so proud of her; but now, that she is apparently surrounded

by love and luxury, and the good things of this world, her temper has become fitful and uncertain, and she makes a grievance out of things that she would have laughed at in the days of old. I can't understand it, unless indeed (and here the dear old lady's looks changed from perplexity to a very tender sadness) Isobel's prosperity has made her neglectful of higher duties; but I think not—I think I can trust my dear girl for that. Perhaps after all it is only a little indisposition which has affected her temper, or some temporary annoyance which will blow over. We could better bear to see any face in the world clouded than Isobel's face, couldn't we, Count?”

And the “Count” made himself so very agreeable in his efforts to reply to his mistress' question, that he occupied all her attention for the time being, and diverted her thoughts for a little while from poor Isobel and her unusual display of feeling.

But whilst Isobel was making herself so foolish in Miss Burnett's rooms, Rex was making himself worse (as the heading of this chapter informs you) in his own house at Wimbledon. And it fell out on this wise. When

he had permitted his wife to leave him that afternoon, without so much as a farewell kiss (although he watched her graceful figure as she walked across the Common to the railway-station, with many a look of admiration and sigh of regret), he went into his dressing-room to make some change in his own apparel, before he followed her to London to find some amusement for himself which should distract his thoughts. But he must have gone through that performance very leisurely, for he was still in his shirt and trousers, striving, after the fashion of men, till he was red in the face, to fix a pin into the back of his neck-handkerchief to keep it down in its place, when a loud double knock sounded at the door. (*En parenthèse*, what a very pitiable thing it is to see the poor male creatures attempting to do this feat for themselves, for, what with the stiffness of the shirt collars, the thickness of the silk neck-ties, the badness of the pins (for pins, like most other articles nowadays, are none the better for being cheaper), and the clumsiness of their “great, big” fingers, such a number of expletives seem necessary to its accomplishment, that one is tempted to think it would have been almost better for their

morals if those new-fashioned silk neck-ties had never come into vogue)

As Rex heard the ominous sound, he rushed into the passage in time to speak to the servant as he passed through the hall.

“ Your mistress is not at home, James, mind !” he said, quickly, and then leant over the balustrades like a great school-boy, as he was, to listen who should be the visitor. But the door being opened, to his astonishment, it was the voice of Halkett. “ Just in the nick of time, old fellow,” shouted Rex, as he recognized it. “ Come up here, do ! I’m dressing. I was just going to run up to town.” And Halkett mounted the stairs at his friend’s desire, and followed him into his dressing-room. “ Sit down,” said Rex, carelessly, as, the pin business at last completed, he proceeded to invest himself in the rest of his paraphernalia. But Mr. Halkett could not sit down, and said so.

“ I couldn’t sit still, thank you, Reverdon. I don’t think I’ve sat down for the last two days. I’m rather worried about money matters, and I came here expressly to speak to you about them.”

“ Why, good Heavens ! there’s nothing the

matter, Halkett, is there?" exclaimed Rex, turning round, his coat half on and half off, to confront his friend.

Now he took note of him, certainly something must be the matter. It was not often Halkett looked like that. He was not of a disposition like Rex—impetuous and energetic, and excitable; his worst luck, hitherto, had been unable to provoke more than a shrug of his well-covered shoulders, and a dubious smile on his immobile features. Things that hot-headed Rex would stamp, and swear, and rave at, elicited little show of emotion from Henry Halkett; and yet, here he was to-day, looking paler than usual, (or Rex fancied so), really perturbed, and restlessly pacing the length of the little dressing-room in a manner which was exceedingly irritating to the nerves of a beholder, particularly one who was unacquainted with the reason of his disturbance.

"Oh! do sit down, my good fellow!" exclaimed Rex, pushing a chair towards him, "and then you can tell me all about it. It's enough to drive a man mad to watch you tramping up and down, as if you were at the treadmill."

"I can't sit down, Reverdon, don't ask me.

I am really in a tremendous scrape, or shall be, if I can't get a friend to help me; and my own people being abroad, there is no time to apply to them.”

“ Well, I don't think you've got a friend in the world, Halkett, who would help you more willingly than I should, whether they belong to you or not. Only tell me what it is, and what I can do.”

“ What it is is simple enough. I've outrun the constable pretty considerably, and I shall be arrested if I can't raise the wind by to-morrow morning, and to a good extent, too.”

“ How did you manage it, Halkett?”

“ Outrunning the constable” had been such a familiar phase of existence to Rex, in times gone by, that he did not express more astonishment than his words implied, at his friend's news.

“ Well, my governor's deuced poor, you know, and I lent him a matter of a couple of thousands this spring, as the old boy was very hard up, having married two of my sisters last year, and he promised to repay me before now. Expecting to receive it, I have allowed myself to incur greater expenses than I should have otherwise done, and they've let loose the bounds

of war upon me sooner than I expected—that's the long and short of it."

"Couldn't Issachar—" commenced Rex.

"Issachar is my chief creditor. You see, Reverdon, you and I between us have rather squeezed that old sponge dry. He always links us together, and it was only on the occasion of my wanting to raise a little more that he came down upon me for what I owe him."

"Oh! man alive, sit down!" cried Rex, as Halkett recommenced his perambulations. "You'll force me to walk too, if you go on much longer."

"The money's safe enough," said Halkett, bringing himself to a stand-still before Rex, although he made no attempt to comply with his reiterated wish. "I'm sure to have it in a few weeks; indeed, I've written to my father to send it over at once; but I must have something to stop Issachar's mouth in the meanwhile."

"What can I do for you?" said Rex. "How much will be enough? You must be aware, of course, that as we are living within our income, I am not quite so flush of ready money as I used to be, but as much as I can spare

you are heartily welcome to, Halkett, and you know it.”

“Thanks, my dear fellow!” returned the other, “but no money you could lend me could do me half the good that lending me your name will.”

“How do you mean?” inquired Rex. The idea was not new to him, and yet it did not at first strike him in the sense in which his friend used it.

“Why, put your name to a bill for me, Reverdon, just as a matter of form, for my own cash must be over in a few weeks; but Issachar knows you are safe enough now, and he will rest quiet till I pay him.”

Rex Reverdon hesitated. He had a great horror of a bill, as all sensible men have; but Halkett had done the same for him for small amounts, before now, and he did not know how to refuse.

“For how much?” he said, after a moment’s pause.

“A couple of thousands,” returned Halkett. “It’s no good making it less than that, for I shall only get credit to the amount of one, perhaps, and a few hundreds in cash to go on with. I’m regularly cleaned out, Rex.”

"Wouldn't one thousand do, as a sop for Cerberus?" said poor Rex, trying to stave off his fate.

"If you're in the least afraid of me, Reverdon," said Halkett, rather sarcastically, "pray keep your pen in your pocket. I'm as safe, I should hope, for two thousand as for one, and the plain truth is, that less than that will be no use to me at all; it would only cover half what I owe, and I shall be arrested all the same for the other half. No, I won't trouble you, thank you. It would be only making you uneasy for nothing."

Rex Reverdon's handsome face had flushed deeper and deeper, during his friend's speech. As he finished it, he sprang forward and clasped his hands, all his generous nature beaming in his eyes.

"Halkett, how can you say that! I could never doubt you for a moment. I know you're as safe as the Bank of England. I was only foolish enough to think that it is scarcely my own money, to lend or give. But what does it signify? it is but a form after all, as you say, and I'm only too glad to be able to oblige you. Have you the bill here?" for Halkett had drawn

a piece of paper with an ominous looking stamp upon it from his pocket, during his last speech.

“Yes, I have,” he then said, though rather hesitatingly. “I thought it as well to bring it with me, because I promised Issachar that I would let him know, one way or another, by four o’clock this afternoon.”

“All right. I’ll sign it at once. Give it me.”

There were pens and ink on a side table in the room, and Rex Reverdon took his fate in his hands, and walked over there with it, steadily enough.

“Two thousands at three months’ sight,” he murmured, as he rapidly ran over the wording of the bill. “Oh, that’s lots of time, Halkett, for you to hear from your governor twenty times over.”

“Of course it is, my dear fellow. Do you think I’d ask you to do such a thing if it wasn’t? If my father was to die to-morrow, it would be as safe as if I had it here now. Only wish I had, and then there would be no need to trouble you.”

“Trouble’s a pleasure,” laughed Rex, as he

stooped over the little writing-table and scribbled "Reginald Hopeaway Reverdon," in his large, irregular hand, across the bill Halkett had presented to him.

"There it is, Hal," he said, presently, as he laid it before his friend. "Stop a minute though, I'll blot it."

"Now, I suppose, I ought to give you an I O U," said Halkett, as he also moved towards the writing-table. "Any paper there, Reverdon?"

"Well, there ought to be," said Rex, searching between the leaves of the blotting-book, "but of course there isn't. Oh, those maids! those maids! That makes three quires of cream-laid that they have prigged out of this identical blotting-book, during the last week. We must get some paper downstairs, Halkett."

"Any time will do," answered Halkett, carelessly. "I'm not likely to forget it, Reverdon, and I must be off soon."

"Wait till I've done dressing," urged Rex, putting the last touches to his toilette with undue haste. "I should like to go with you, Halkett."

He was soon ready, and they descended the staircase together.

“I’m sure I’m infinitely obliged to you, Rex,” said Halkett, as he stowed away the bill in his pocket-book, “and all I can say is, that I’ll do the same for you when you want it.”

“I’m sure you would, old fellow,” replied Rex. “By-the-by, (they were passing the dining-room door by this time,) what about the I O U? Will you come in and give it me now, or at your rooms?”

“Well, if you’re not in a great hurry, Reverdon, about it, it will make a difference to me, because I particularly want to catch this 3.35 train, and we shall be too late unless we go at once. There’s lots of pens and ink at my rooms, if you’ll trust me till then.”

Of course Rex would trust him till then, or to all eternity. For the matter of that, he really did not see the necessity of a formal I O U at all, between friends. But Mr. Halkett was, very properly, shocked at the idea of such an irregular proceeding, and read Rex quite a lecture up in the train, on the folly of not having everything formally arranged in a case like this, even when it was between friends. Who knew what might happen? &c., &c., and even the best of

friends had turned out traitors; at which affirmation Rex's honest face had looked indignantly, and he had answered—

“Not *real* friends, Halkett,—not friends like you and I.” To which Mr. Halkett had rejoined, “Certainly, not *real* friends,” but left the latter part of the sentence uncommented upon. Traitor as he was, he could not quite reconcile his conscience to playing Judas so closely as that. But, strange to say, notwithstanding all his good advice and staid counsels, Mr. Henry Halkett did not give his I O U to Rex Reverdon that evening, or any evening to come. When they visited his chambers, they were hurried, and forgot all about it, (or he did,) until he was outside the door again, and then he said he would send it to Wimbledon by post, the next day; but the post never brought it, and week after week went by without its being given, and when Rex Reverdon thought of the omission, with, perhaps, a passing fear, he never failed to reproach himself afterwards for thinking so trifling a form necessary between “friends like you and I.” And his anxiety concerning the continued estrangement between himself and Isobel occupied so large a portion of his

thoughts, that he ceased to care much about less important things, and soon had almost forgotten that he had ever put his name at all to a bill for Mr. Halkett.

CHAPTER XII.

THE VILLA AT EALING WITH THE BLINDS
DOWN.

THE immediate results upon Lucy Halkett of that jaunt to London with her cousin Henry were not, as you may suppose, so satisfactory as her grandmother had hoped they would be. The impropriety of his not bringing her home but by one of the latest trains was scarcely less fruitful a subject for the nurse's indignation than were the red eyes with which her nurseling returned to her care.

"Only the dust," Lucy had said, as the old woman undressed her and commented upon the circumstance; "it flew so in my face as we drove to Wimbledon."

And nurse had swallowed the excuse very quietly at the time, though she was anything but quiet when she narrated the fact to her mistress the next morning.

“ Dust, ma’am? No more dust than I’m dust, which, thank the Lord, I don’t feel a bit like it, whatever people say. It’s just like Mr. Henry, begging your pardon, to teach our child to put us off with a rubbaging lie like that. Why, the dear lamb had been crying, ma’am. I could see it as plain as could be, and that’s what comes of letting a young man have the care of a tender creature like that for a whole day. I’d lay anything I possess that he racketted her up and down them dirty streets till she was fit to drop.”

“ But Lucy says that she scarcely walked at all, nurse, and that she was not in the least tired.”

“ Oh, lor, ma’am! if you’re going for to believe everything that that child tells you, well, it’s time I stopped talking. Of course he’d put her up to saying she wasn’t tired, because he likes trapesing about with her; but Mr. Henry don’t no more know how much a growing girl can stand than you know him, ma’am, begging your pardon.”

Which speech on the part of nurse, notwithstanding the apology contained in her last words, proves pretty plainly what I have said before,

that she was that privileged bore—a confidential servant, and seldom knew when to stop when once the clapper of her tongue was set a-ringing.

This conversation took place the day after Lucy's holiday, and when she was looking thoroughly tired and exhausted from the excitement and fatigue she had gone through. The poor child had indeed received a considerable check to her new-born happiness in the by-play she had witnessed take place behind the scenes at the theatre, which maintained its influence over her for some succeeding days. She moped about at first, and was shy of her cousin when he came to see her, still more shy of any mention of their day of pleasure or proposal of following it up with a second trip. Poor Lucy had another cause of depression just then, and a very serious one for any age to bear—the consciousness that for the first time in her short life part of her heart remained a sealed book to those who had loved and cared for her most since her birth; that she had deceived and disobeyed that good and loving old “Gran” who had never crossed or thwarted her that she could remember, to say nothing of Nursey, who reigned in Lucy's affections co-equally with her mistress. The latter

thought was a worse burden to the girl than the former, which faded and grew less as the weeks went on, whilst this seemed to increase with each day. Often did Lucy—sleepless at night—toss and turn upon her little bed, crying to herself that she *must* tell Gran that she had been to the theatre; that she must go down at once and tell her; that she could not sleep, or pray, or be happy without making the confession. Often did she suggest the same thing to her cousin Henry, but met with such ridicule at the idea of its necessity, even of its advisability, and when she became earnest on the subject, such grave requests that she really wouldn't do anything so foolish, that she dismissed the idea of confession, although she could not dismiss the idea of its being the only rightful course for her to pursue—the only course which would bring her peace and rest. She was too young and innocent to struggle with conflicting feelings, and not betray that she was doing so. The doctor's tonics and recommendations of lots of fresh air, and very little study, though religiously attended to, did not produce any visible improvement; Lucy grew thinner and paler, and continued as languid and depressed as before. Upon this Mrs.

Halkett's care and tenderness were redoubled. Everything in the house was made to give way to the girl's health ; she was removed altogether from school for the present. She had nothing to do but to get well and strong. It was very unaccommodating of her not to do so. Poor old nurse was almost ready, for the first time in her life, to set down her "lamb" as ungrateful and obstinate. And all this devotion and constant solicitude served no better purpose than pricking the tender heart to that degree until it appeared to Lucy sometimes as if she could not endure it, and be silent. Then came the introduction to Mrs. Reverdon, brought about through her cousin's means, and after that many pleasant days spent at Wimbledon, afternoons passed with Gabriel Huntley and his heart-appealing music, or with Isobel reading aloud to them both in a way in which *very, very* few private individuals can read ; for they had only to shut their eyes, as Gabriel said, and fancy there were half a dozen people talking instead of one. Happy evenings, when Rex Reverdon, perhaps, was in town, exchanging the pure society of his wife for the false pleasure of Halkett's unhallowed company, and she and Lucy sat alone with their

work, and the young girl told Isobel all her little fancies and worries—her worries without any reserve, and all her fancies save one, and that one she need not have kept to herself; for Isobel, with a woman's quick perception, had guessed this child's secret from looks and stray words, though with a woman's tact she had never approached the subject. With a girl of sixteen to speak of love is to confirm what might, if left alone, die a natural death, without putting itself into words. And Isobel already liked Lucy too well to be able to think of such a fancy on her part as a love for Henry Halkett becoming a fixed feeling without a shudder. But although she carefully avoided the subject of Lucy's admiration for her cousin, she had a winning way with her, especially with young people, that caused them almost involuntarily to make her the confidante of their little troubles. It seemed almost as if speaking of trouble to Isobel Reverdon was the same as giving it to her to cast away for you. She had such a plain perception of what was the right thing to do under any circumstances, and such a stock of comfort to draw from for every sorrow, that, as soon as you had intrusted your case to her

hands, you felt astonished, as one truth after another fell from her lips, to think that the same ideas had not occurred to you before, and saved you from an infinity of unnecessary pain. So the autumn months passed away without events of greater importance happening than those I have already related to you, and Christmas had come and gone, and still Lucy paid her periodical visits to Isobel's house. The cold weather had tried Mrs. Halkett very much ; she had been growing gradually feebler during the fall of the year, and daily less able to sit up and be a cheerful companion for her youthful grand-daughter. And so she was only too glad that Lucy should have the advantage of Mrs. Reverdon's society, and encouraged her visits to Wimbledon as much as possible. And with every visit Lucy grew more and more to love her kind friend, and to intrust her with what she would have told to no one else. So it came to pass that one evening in January, as she was alone with Isobel, she let slip, with many a word of contrition afterwards, she hardly knew how, the whole of that story about her disobeying her grandmother, and going to the theatre with her cousin, and how uneasy she felt whenever she

thought of it. Isobel did not animadvert to the penitent girl before her on the shame she considered due to a man like Henry Halkett for having led her into such an act of direct disobedience; she did not deem it part of her duty to throw the blame which Lucy ought to feel rested on herself on another person's shoulders; but she knew that the blame was there nevertheless, and felt still more that her want of trust in her husband's friend was not misplaced. But she did not tell Lucy so. She only held the girl's hand in hers whilst the early dusk fell around them, and placed the ingratitude and the sin of her disobedience before her in so strong a light, and yet with such loving words, that Lucy's tears fell plentifully before she had concluded, and the resolution which she made, notwithstanding her cousin's dissuasions, to confess all her fault to her grandmother before she slept that night, was very honest and sincere.

“I will not praise you for such a resolution, Lucy,” said Isobel, as she told her of it, “because it will be only performing a very plain duty on your part, and I know that you will never feel any real peace until you have done so, but I shall love you much the better for it, dear.”

And Lucy had said, as, indeed, she felt, that the action would bring its reward in Mrs. Reverdon's love, if in nothing else ; and gone home that evening, with a firm resolve that she would carry out her words, even though Henry Halkett escorted her home and made himself very fascinating, or tried to do so, all the way. But Lucy had suffered too much in the last few months to be easily turned now from her fixed purpose, even had the subject been started, which it was not. But to get from Wimbledon to Ealing occupies a good deal of time, and it was ten o'clock again before Lucy was deposited at home. Her first inquiry upon entering the house was for her grandmother.

"Your grandmamma has been in bed and asleep hours ago, Miss Lucy," replied the nurse, who opened the door to her, "and you must get your supper quickly like a good lamb, and go up stairs quietly, for fear you wake her."

"I don't want any supper, nurse," said Lucy, "but I must speak to Gran to-night. I've got something very particular to tell her."

Nurse was horrified at the very suggestion of the sacrilege of rousing the old lady after she had once put her to bed and tucked her up.

“Do I hear you right, Miss Lucy!” she exclaimed; “you want to go a rumpaging up into your grandmamma’s room, and wake her out of her first sleep, to hear some of the rubbering stories you bring home with you. You must be going daft, my lamb, to think of such a thing. Come, you eat your supper and I’ll put you to bed.”

“But, nurse, I *must* speak to Gran to-night.”

“Well, when you comes to *must*, Miss Lucy, it’s time for me to say *must not*. I can’t hear of it, miss, so don’t ask it again. Why your poor dear grandmamma went to bed as tired as could be. She hasn’t felt well all day, and to-night she just seemed falling to pieces. ‘Get me up to bed,’ she says, ‘and let me be.’”

In which statement, considering that Mrs. Halkett came of an excellent family and was a highly-educated lady, I can hardly believe that nurse’s imagination did not run away with her memory, although I dare say her words conveyed the sentiment of her mistress’s last request. Any way this had the effect of preventing Lucy expressing another wish to disturb her.

“Poor old Gran!” she said; “was she very tired?”

"Very tired, Miss Lucy, and so must you be, so let me put you to bed too."

She did not object, for she was weary enough, but it was some time before she slept. She was so sorry, as she lay, to think that her interview with her grandmother was delayed till the morning. She felt just as if she was going to have a tooth out; she thought it would have been easier to have told her story by candle-light. She wondered what Gran would say and how she would look when she heard it, and under the imagination that the looks would be very sorrowful and the words very grave, Lucy fell asleep at last with many tender, regretful, loving thoughts for poor old Gran, and reproachful ones for herself.

She must really have been fatigued, for she slept very late into the next morning, slept soundly and undisturbed until the dull January sun had risen well into the sky and made the day as light as he intended to make it at all. Morning dreams, they say, come true, and Lucy dreamed that morning (or she thought so) that some one was ill or in distress, and that some one was crying too; and the dream made her turn restlessly in her half-broken slumber.

and moan every now and then, for some time before she fairly awoke. And when she did so it came all at once ; a louder sob than heretofore ringing through her sleep, dispelled it, and Lucy sat up suddenly in her bed, to find that her dream was in a measure true, and that old nurse was sitting by her bedside rocking herself gently to and fro, and burying her sounds of grief in her purple-checked apron,

“ What is the matter, nurse ? ” exclaimed the girl, frightened at the unexpected sight ; “ why are you crying ? ”

An idea had struck her, that nurse had already been made cognisant in some mysterious manner of her unconfessed peccadillo, and was lamenting the wickedness of her lost lamb. But her grief on this occasion was for a more serious loss still.

“ Nurse, why don’t you speak ? ” reiterated Lucy, as she shook her arm. “ What is the matter ? you frighten me ! ”

“ Oh, my sweet lamb ! ” exclaimed the old servant in no quiet tones, after the manner of the uneducated, who generally grieve like howling dervishes. “ Oh ! my child, my Lucy, my poor child ! Oh ! Oh ! Oh—h ! ” and buried her

face and her secret once more in the purple-checked apron.

“Where’s grandmamma?” said Lucy, jumping out of bed, as if to seek her, for she thought her nurse must be ill. But she was caught by her nightgown as she tried to pass her, and detained.

“Don’t you go in there, my lamb; you stop with your poor nurse. Oh! this is a day to be remembered! • Oh! the Lord have mercy on us all!”

“Where is Gran?” said Lucy. “Tell me at once, nurse, or I will go, and see for myself.”

Something of the truth was dawning on the girl’s mind, and the knowledge that she had a right to be told the bad news (if bad it was) made her last request appear quite womanly, in its evident intention of being complied with.

“Oh! my dear child, you’ve got no grandmamma—the blessed creature’s gone! You’ve got no one but me, my lamb. Oh! the Lord have mercy on our souls!”

Does the prayer appear ludicrous because it is made to issue from an ignorant mouth? It did not *sound* so, because it came from the depths of a loving heart. Poor nurse had been

brought face to face with sudden death that morning, and the shock, no less than the grief of it had made her feel that her soul might also take its flight with as little warning, and that the mercy she implored was the only clothing which should be found sufficient to cover its nakedness in that day. What she said, was only too true. Mrs. Halkett was gone, and Lucy had no grandmother upon the earth. When the faithful old nurse had stepped cautiously into the bedroom that morning, and peeped round the drawn curtains, to be sure that her mistress was awake before she disturbed her, she only saw what she knew at a glance—from the altered features and the fallen jaw—would never waken again, nor be disturbed by any sound, except that of the last trumpet. And Dr. Bustle had been summoned, and confirmed her private assertion with his professional one; and the other servant had been in, to gape at the new-made corpse, and then poor nurse had nothing to do but to sit down by her lamb’s bed-side, and wait patiently till she awoke, to have the sad news detailed to her; and then had broken down, for the first time since she had known the fact of her mistress’s death, and

woke her lamb herself, eager for the reason of her tears. As the last sentence which I wrote of her dropped from nurse's lips, Lucy's youthful figure seemed to stiffen in her grasp.

"Dead!" she exclaimed; "my Gran dead, nurse? and before I had told her. Oh! nurse, *say* it isn't true! Oh! it *can't* be true! I *must* speak to her! I *must* tell her how wicked I have been! I wanted to do it last night. Not dead, nurse, not quite dead—*say* you are not sure?"

"My dear lamb," said the old woman, in a fresh burst of grief, "I wish I could say so, but I can't. It's all true, my dear. She must have gone off in her sleep. She lay as quiet as a babe when I went in to call her this morning; but she was cold then, and Dr. Bustle has been since, and he says there's nothing to be done. Oh! my lamb—"

For Lucy had slipped from her hold and was gone.

"Oh! she ain't never going to see her grandma, the pretty dear, and she not laid out!" exclaimed the nurse, as she got up and followed her charge.

Ah! where else should the poor child go?

Where else should the conscience-stricken repentant little heart find rest, if not there? By the time nurse reached the bedroom Mrs. Halkett had occupied, Lucy was on the coverlet of the bed, and with youth's innate fear of death swallowed up in the bitterness of her remorse, had her fresh young cheek pressed to the cold withered face of her grandmother's corpse, and her warm arms encircling the dead body. Of course the nurse's first attempt was to disengage her from the unnatural embrace, but in this she failed. She had to content herself with standing on one side and listening to the self-reproaches which fell from the poor girl's lips.

“Oh, Gran!—Oh, dear old Gran!” cried Lucy. “I should have told you all this morning. I meant to do so, if you had but stayed to hear it. Oh, Gran! I am so sorry. I wish I had never gone. I have wished it ever since. I have been so wrong—so disobedient—so ungrateful. You will forgive me, Gran, won’t you? Oh, nurse! she can’t hear—she can’t hear! she can’t speak to me! I shall never hear her say that she forgives me. Oh, nurse! what shall I do?”

Then she turned from the bed, with a sudden

shuddering wonder how she ever could have laid there, and threw herself into her nurse's arms, to sob out all her confession on her motherly breast, mixed up with lamentations for her loss, and promises of future obedience. This was just the turn that nurse liked to see matters take ; she could lead her child back into the bedroom now, and dress her, and thence into the drawing-room to be petted, and coddled, and condoled with, for the rest of the day. Lucy did not find it a very difficult thing to obtain nurse's absolution for her offence, and at such a moment too, as you may suppose ; but the unhardened conscience could not forgive itself so easily. The burden of her unconfessed and unforgiven fault—of the fault which would never be confessed now, and never forgiven, until she met her grandmother in that place where the remembrance of sin even is wiped out—weighed upon Lucy's mind more than it had ever done during the months she had borne the consciousness of the fault about with her. Of course she was not left alone with her nurse long. Henry Halkett was down at Ealing in the course of the day, ready to take the direction of everything into his own hands, and the consolation of

his pretty young cousin into the bargain. Mrs. Halkett's temporal affairs were not difficult of arrangement. Her husband had been a General in the army, and with her death the pension which government had allowed her, for his rank and services, died also. Future provision for Lucy there was none, but it had always been decided and arranged by Mrs. Halkett, in many conversations and letters with her son and grandson, that in the event of her death, Henry Halkett was to convey his cousin abroad as soon as possible, and place her under the guardianship of his father and her uncle; and Lucy had always been led to expect the same. Therefore it was no cause of surprise to her when Henry Halkett informed her that he should take her there as soon as convenient after his grandmother's funeral.

“Not for a month or six weeks, perhaps,” he added, “for I must arrange matters so as to suit my own convenience a little, but it's as well to be prepared. Nurse and the cook must live with you here until then, Lucy, and I will run down and cheer up my Butterfly as often as I can.”

But it was a great grief to both nurse and

Lucy to hear that the former was not to go to France with her. Somehow, Lucy had hardly expected it, but the poor old woman had never imagined she would be parted from her "lamb" until she was sacrificed in marriage.

"I'd almost rather have had her laid alongside of missus," she said, in confidence to her fellow-servant, after she had heard the news, "than to live to see her shipped off to foreign parts with a gentleman like Mr. Henry, who, t's my belief, isn't any better than a foreigner himself, and I couldn't find a worse name for him if I tried."

Isobel had gone over to Ealing to see her little friend, directly she heard of Mrs. Halkett's death, and had offered to take Lucy back to Wimbledon with her; but this offer Mr. Halkett had, for reasons of his own, declined on his cousin's behalf. It did not happen to suit his views, just then, to have Lucy domesticated in the Reverdons' house. Therefore she was obliged to be contented with such scraps of comfort and sympathy as Isobel could send her by letter, and one or two flying visits which she managed to pay her at Ealing. In this way the time went on for nearly a month, slowly and

sadly enough to Lucy (though she scarcely expected much enjoyment from the anticipated change to her uncle's house), and still, no notice, or hint of a notice to move, came from Mr. Halkett.

But one evening, about ten o'clock, after the inmates of the villa at Ealing were all in bed and asleep,—for they had little enough to sit up late for,—his familiar knock was heard at the hall-door, and nurse had to slip on her gown again, and go down and let him in.

“All gone to bed!” he exclaimed as she did so; “that's unfortunate, for I must see Miss Lucy.”

He was very nervous as he said this, but he only showed it by being in, apparently, a great hurry, and not quite sure of what he intended to do; for he stripped himself of his great-coat, plaid, and gloves, throwing them on the hall-table, and then, without any shown reason, commenced re-enveloping himself in them.

“Where is Miss Lucy?” he demanded sharply, as the old nurse held the light for the better performance of his eccentricities, with visible astonishment.

“Lor, Sir! she's in 'bed, poor lamb; you're never wanting to speak to her to-night, surely?”

"Yes, I do," he replied ; "I'm going abroad to-morrow, nurse ; you must pack her boxes at once."

The candlestick almost dropped from the old nurse's hands as she heard the news.

"To-morrow, Sir ? Lor ! and, to give us no more notice than this. Why I calculated you'd give me a week or a fortnight, to look over her bits of things before I packed them, which though they're always tidy I hope, ain't kept fit to go on sea-voyages at a night's notice."

"Well, I can't help it," he rejoined, "tidy or not they must go as they are. You must pack Miss Lucy's boxes, and meet me with her at the London Bridge Station to-morrow, for the two o'clock train. Now mind you're punctual. Don't be there a minute later than half-past one."

Lucy, who had been roused by her cousin's arrival, and slipped on a dressing-gown, now came down the stairs, looking like a little ghost, as she also heard the news that he had come to communicate.

"Well, Butterfly, we're off to-morrow. I can't come to Ealing to escort you, because I'm choked with business ; but you must meet me,

with nurse, at the London Bridge Station.” He then retailed to her much the same directions, only more minutely, that he had given the nurse before she came. She was about to make some remark on its being very short notice, but he stopped her.

“Now don’t croak, Butterfly; I’ve told you all along that you might expect to go about this time, and your traps won’t take half-an-hour to stow away. Whatever you do, however, be punctual to-morrow. If you make a mistake, or are late, I shall have to go without you, because I *must* cross, whether or not.”

Lucy was surprised now, and became curious. “But why, Harry? You said nothing of it yesterday. In fact, you spoke of my going to say good-bye to Mrs. Reverdon next week.”

He grew confused at her question, but staved it off awkwardly—

“Did I? I must have been dreaming. I ought to have told you yesterday, Butterfly, but I am so full of business, I suppose I forgot it; however, you know it now, and you’ll be sure and be punctual. What! don’t you like to come with me, Lucy?”

For the girl’s face had turned from him, and

her lip was trembling. Her only answer was to turn to him again, and let her eyes speak for her. She promised compliance with all his wishes, and in another minute he was off again to catch the return train for London.

As soon as the door had closed after him, and the nurse had finished replacing the bolts and bars which she had withdrawn for his admittance, she took up the candlestick and urged Lucy to go back to her bed.

"I can pack your things, my dear," said the old woman's sorrowful voice, "but you will want all your strength for to-morrow."

She looked into the girl's pale face as she spoke, and the childish eyes which had beamed upon her bosom for so many years, met hers.

"Oh, nurse!" cried Lucy.

Nurse put down the candlestick upon the hall-table and opened her arms, and the girl was in them in a moment, and sobbing on her breast,

"Oh, nurse! dear old nurse!"

"Oh, my lamb! my dear baby!"

It seemed to the faithful creature in that moment of parting as if the baby form she had first received had never sprung into a woman's

stature, nor the baby-heart ripened into a woman's seat of suffering.

The reason for Mr. Halkett's sudden determination they neither of them guessed, and neither of them dared to ask the other.

But as it is necessary that you should know it for the sake of understanding my story, I must ask you to go back with me, for a little while, and see what was taking place in London, on the evening of the same day.

END OF VOL. II.



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